

THE HUNGER GAMES

THE HUNGER GAMES RUNNER



THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE HUNGER GAMES
BOOK ONE



From the Chicken House

I love books like this. You are plunged into the action, just as confused and frightened as the characters you meet. There are no rules – or none that make sense – but gradually you learn to survive, and to hope. Or is that another trick? This is brilliant, nail-gnashing stuff.

Thanks, James, I didn't want to sleep for a week anyway!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

THE MAZE RUNNER

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Chicken
House

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For Lynette.

This book was a three-year journey,
and you never doubted.

CHAPTER 1

He began his new life standing up, surrounded by cold darkness and stale, dusty air.

Metal ground against metal; a lurching shudder shook the floor beneath him. He fell down at the sudden movement and shuffled backwards on his hands and feet, drops of sweat beading on his forehead despite the cool air. His back struck a hard metal wall; he slid along it until he hit the corner of the room. Sinking to the floor, he pulled his legs up tight against his body, hoping his eyes would soon adjust to the darkness.

With another jolt, the room jerked upwards like an old lift in a mine shaft.

Harsh sounds of chains and pulleys, like the workings of an ancient steel factory, echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls with a hollow, tinny whine. The lightless lift swayed back and forth as it ascended, turning the boy's stomach sour with nausea; a smell like burnt oil invaded his senses, making him feel worse. He wanted to cry, but no tears came; he could only sit there, alone, waiting.

My name is Thomas, he thought.

That . . . that was the only thing he could remember about his life.

He didn't understand how this could be possible. His mind functioned without flaw, trying to calculate his surroundings and predicament. Knowledge flooded his thoughts, facts and images, memories and details of the world and how it works. He pictured snow on trees, running down a leaf-strewn road, eating a burger, the moon casting a pale glow on a grassy meadow, swimming in a lake, a busy city square with hundreds of people bustling about their business.

And yet he didn't know where he came from, or how he'd got into the dark lift, or who his parents were. He didn't even know his last name. Images of people flashed across his mind, but there was no recognition, their faces replaced with haunted smears of colour. He couldn't think of one person he knew, or recall a single conversation.

The room continued its ascent, swaying; Thomas grew immune to the ceaseless rattling of the chains that pulled him upwards. A long time passed. Minutes stretched into hours, although it was impossible to know for sure because every second seemed an eternity. No. He was smarter than that. Trusting his instincts, he knew he'd been moving for roughly half an hour.

Strangely enough, he felt his fear whisked away like a swarm of gnats caught in the wind, replaced by an intense curiosity. He wanted to know where he was and what was happening.

With a groan and then a clonk, the rising room halted; the sudden change jolted Thomas from his huddled position and threw him across the hard floor. As he scrambled to his feet, he felt the room sway less and less until it finally stilled. Everything fell silent.

A minute passed. Two. He looked in every direction but saw only darkness; he felt along the walls again, searching for a way out. But there was nothing, only the cool metal. He groaned in

frustration, his echo amplified through the air. Like the haunted moan of death. It faded, and silence returned. He screamed, called for help, pounded on the walls with his fists.

Nothing.

Thomas backed into the corner, once again, folded his arms and shivered, and the fear returned. He felt a worrying shudder in his chest, as if his heart wanted to escape, to flee his body.

"Someone help me," he screamed, each word ripped his throat raw.

A loud clank rang out above him and he sucked in a startled breath as he looked up. A straight line of light appeared across the ceiling of the room, and Thomas watched as it expanded. A heavy grating sound revealed double sliding doors being forced open. After so long in darkness, the light stabbed his eyes, he looked away, covering his face with both hands.

He heard noises above, voices, and fear squeezed his chest.

"Look at that shank."

"How old is he?"

"Looks like a klunk in a T-shirt."

"You're the klunk, shuck-face."

Dude, it smells like feet down there."

"Hope you enjoyed the one-way trip, Greenie."

"Ain't no ticket back, bro."

Thomas was hit with a wave of confusion, blasted with panic. The voices were odd, mixed with echo; some of the words were completely foreign, others familiar. He widened his eyes, and as he squinted towards the light and those speaking, at first he could see only softening shadows, but they soon turned into the shapes of bodies, people bending over the hole in the ceiling, looking down at him, pointing.

And then, as if the lens of a camera had sharpened its focus, the faces cleared. They were boys, all of them, some young, some older. Thomas didn't know what he'd expected, but seeing these faces puzzled him. They were just teenagers, kids. Some

of his fear melted away, but not enough to calm his racing heart.

Someone lowered a rope from above: the end of it tied into a big loop. Thomas hesitated, then stepped into it with his right foot and caught the rope as he was yanked upwards the sky. Hands reached down: lots of hands, grabbing him by his clothes, pulling him up. The world seemed to spin, a swirling mist of faces and colour and light. A storm of emotions wrenched his gut, twisted and painful: he wanted to scream, cry, throw up. The chorus of voices had grown silent, but someone spoke as they yanked him over the sharp edge of the dark box. And Thomas knew next never forget the words.

"Nice to meet ya, shank," the boy said. "Welcome to the Glade."

CHAPTER 2

The helping hands didn't stop swarming around him until Thomas stood up straight and had the dust brushed from his shirt and pants. So dazzled by the light, he staggered a bit. He was consumed with curiosity and, not yet too old to look closely at his surroundings. His new companions said nothing as he swiveled his head around, trying to take it all in.

As he rotated in a slow circle, the other kids giggled and stared; some reached out and poked him with a finger. There had to be at least fifty of them, their clothes smudged and sweaty as if they'd been hard at work, all shapes and sizes and races, their hair of varying lengths. Thomas suddenly felt dizzy, his eyes flickering between the boys and the bizarre place in which he'd found himself.

They stood in a vast courtyard several times the size of a football field, surrounded by four enormous walls made of grey stone and covered in spots with black ivy. The walls had to be hundreds of feet high and formed a perfect square around them, each side split in the exact middle by an opening as tall

as the walls themselves that from what Thomas could see led to passages and long corridors beyond.

"Look at the greenbean!" a scratchy voice said. Thomas couldn't see who it came from. "Gonna break his shack neck & reckon out the new digs." Several boys laughed.

"Sit your butt down!" a deeper voice responded.

Thomas looked back on the dozens of strangers around him. He knew he must look out of it. He felt he had been dragged. A tall kid with blond hair and a square jaw stared at him, his face devoid of expression. A short, pudgy boy trajected back and forth on his feet, looking up at Thomas with wide eyes. A thick, heavily muscled Asian kid folded his arms as he stared Thomas, his right sleeve rolled up, as if to show off hisiceps. A dark skinned boy frowned. The same one who'd warned him. Countless others stared.

"Where am I?" Thomas asked, surprised at hearing his voice for the first time in his salvagable memory. It didn't sound quite right. Higher than he would've imagined.

"Nowhere good. This came from the dark skinned boy. "Just sit in yourself, relax and calm."

"Which keepers he gonna get?" someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

"I told ya, shack face!" a shrill voice responded. "He's a kungie, so he's be a Slopper - no doubt about it." The kungiegleen kid had just said the funniest thing in history.

Thomas once again felt a pressing wave of confusion, hearing so many words and phrases that didn't make sense. *Shack face*. *Work-keeper*. *Slopper*. They popped out of the boys' mouths so naturally it seemed odd for him not to understand. It was as if his memory loss had stolen a chunk of his language. It was disorientating.

A fierce, emotions battle, and dominance in his mind and heart. Confusion. Curiosity. Panic. Fear. But faded through it all was the dark feeling of utter hopelessness. Like he would had ended for him had been wiped from his memory and replaced

with something awful. He wanted to run and hide from these people.

The scratchy-voiced boy was talking "even do that much better, I've got it." Thomas still couldn't see his face.

"I said shut your holes," the dark boy yelled. "Keep yapping and next break'll be cut in half."

That must be their leader, Thomas realised. Hating how everyone gawked at him, he concentrated on studying the place the boy had called the Glade.

The floor of the courtyard looked like it was made of huge stone blocks, many of them cracked and filled with long grasses and weeds. An odd dilapidated wooden building near one of the corners of the square contrasted greatly with the grey stone. A few trees stood aside of their roots like gnarled hands digging into the rock floor for food. Another corner of the compound held gardens - from where he was standing Thomas recognised corn, tomato plants, fruit trees.

Across the courtyard from here stood wretched pens holding sheep and pigs and cows. A large grove of trees filled the final corner; the closest ones looked crippled and close to dying. The sky overhead was cloudless and bright, but Thomas couldn't see any sign of the sun despite the brightness of the day. The creeping shadows of the walls didn't reveal the time or direction. It could be early morning or late afternoon. As he breathed in deeply, trying to settle his nerves, a mixture of smells hit him. Freshly turned dirt, manure, pine, some hanging rotten and something sweet. So much so he knew that these were the smells of a farm.

Thomas looked back at his captors, feeling awkward but desperate to ask questions. *Captain, he thought. Then, Why did that word pop into my head?* He scanned their faces, taking in each expression, watching them. One boy's eyes flared with hatred, snapped him cold. He looked so angry Thomas wouldn't have been surprised if the kid had come at him with a knife. He had black hair and when they made eye contact,

the boy shook his head and turned away walking towards a greasy iron pole with a wooden bench next to it. A dirty-colored flag hung limply at the top of the pole, no wind to reveal its pattern.

Shaken, Thomas stared at the boy's back until he turned around and took a seat. Thomas quickly looked away.

Suddenly the leader of the group – perhaps he was seven, ten – took a step forward. He wore normal clothes, black T-shirt, jeans, trainers, a digital watch. For some reason the clothing here surprised Thomas, it seemed like everyone should be wearing something more menacing – like prison gear. The dark-skinned boy had short-cropped hair, his face clean-shaven. But other than the permanent scowl, there was nothing scary about him at all.

"It's a long story, shank," the boy said. "Piece by piece, you'll earn it. I'll be taking you on the tour tomorrow. I'll then just don't break anything." He held out a hand – at "Name's Alby." He was ed, clearly wanting to shake hands.

Thomas refused. Some instinct took over his actions and without saying anything, he turned away from Alby and walked to a nearby tree, where he plopped down to sit with his back against the rough bark. Pain's sweet release hit him once again, almost too much to bear. But he took a deep breath and forced himself to try to accept the situation – *hang on, wait* he thought. *You won't figure out anything if you give in to fear.*

"Then, el...ie." Thomas called out, struggling to keep his voice even. "Tell me the long story."

Alby glanced at the metals closer to him, rolling his eyes, and Thomas studied the crowd again. His original estimate had been close – there were probably fifty to sixty of them, ranging from boys in the teens to young adults. One Alby who seemed to be one of the oldest. At that moment, Thomas realised with a sickening jolt that he had no idea how *old* he was. His heart sank at the thought – he was so lost he didn't even know his own age.

"Serious." he said, giving up on the show of courage. "Where am I?"

Alby walked over to him and sat down cross-legged, the crowd of boys followed and packed in behind. Heads popped up here and there, kids leaning in every direction to get a better look.

"If you ain't scared," Alby said, "you ain't human. Act any different and I'd throw you off the Cliff because I'd mean you're a psycho."

"The Cliff?" Thomas asked, blood draining from his face.

"Shuck it," Alby said, rubbing his eyes. "Ain't no way to start these conversations, you get me? We ain't let sharks see you here. I promise. Just try and avoid being killed, survive whatever."

He paused, and Thomas realised his face must have whitened even more when he heard that last part.

"Man," Alby said, then ran his hands over his short hair as he let out a long sigh. "I ain't good at this. You're the first Greenbean since Nick was killed."

Thomas's eyes widened, and another boy stepped up and playfully slapped Alby across the head. "Wait for the bloody Tour A guy," he said, his voice thick with an odd accent. "Kids gonna have a buggin' heart attack, not'n even been heard yet." He bent down and extended his hand towards Thomas. "Name's Newt. Greenbe, and we'd all be right cheery if yad forgive our klunk-for-brains new leader here."

Thomas reached out and shook the boy's hand. He seemed a lot nicer than Alby. Newt was taller than Alby too, but looked to be a year or so younger. His hair was blond and ear-long, cascading over his forehead. Veins stuck out of his muscular arms.

"Pope, shuck face," Alby grunted, pushing Newt down to sit next to him. "At least he can understand *half* my words." There were a few scattered laughs, and then everyone gathered behind Alby and Newt, packing in even tighter, waiting to hear what they said.

Aby spread his arms out, palms up. "This place is called the Grade, all right. It's where we live, where we eat, where we sleep, we call ourselves the Graders. That's all, you."

"What sent me here?" Thomas demanded, fear finally giving way to anger. "How'd—"

But Aby's hand shot out before he could finish, grabbing Thomas by the shirt as he leaned forward on his knees. "Get up, shank, get up." Aby stood, pulling Thomas with him.

Thomas finally got his feet under him, scared all over again. He backed away for the tree, trying to get away from Aby, who stayed right in his face.

"No interruptions, boy," Aby shouted. "Whack! If we did you everything, you'd die on the spot, right at it you klunked your pants. Buggers'd drag you off, and you ain't no good to us then, are ya?"

"I don't even know what you're talking about," Thomas said, slowly, shucked at how steady his voice sounded.

Newt reached out and grabbed Aby by the shoulders. "Aby, aw, off a bit. You're hurtin' more than helpin'. Ya know?"

Aby let go of Thomas's shirt and stepped back, his chest heaving with breaths. "Ain't got time to be nice. Greenbean. Old rules over new. It's begun. Learn the rules quick, or else, don't talk. You get me?"

Thomas looked over at Newt, hoping for help. Everything inside him churned and hurt, the tears that had yet to come burned his eyes.

Newt nodded. "Creepie, you get hurt, right?" He nodded again.

Thomas then wanted to punch somebody. But he simply said, "Yeah."

"Good ear?" Aby said. "First Day. That's what today is for you, mark. Night's coming. Runners'll be back soon. The Box came here today, ain't got time for the Tour, it's tomorrow morning, right after the wake-up." He turned towards Newt. "Get him a bed, get him to sleep."

"Good that," Newt said.

Alby's eyes returned to Thomas, narrowing. "A few weeks you'll be happy, shant? You'll be happy and happy. None of us knew jack on First Day, you neither. New life begins tomorrow."

Alby turned and pushed his way through the crowd, then headed for the slanted window branching in the corner. Most of the kids wandered away then, each one giving Thomas a lingering look before they walked off.

Thomas tolded his arms closed, his eyes took a deep breath. Emptiness are away at his insides, quickly replaced by a sadness that hurt his heart. It was all so much. Where was he? What was this place? Was it some kind of prison? If so, why had he been sent here, and for how long? The language was odd and none of the boys seemed to care whether he lived or died. Tears threatened again to fill his eyes, but he refused to let them come.

"What did I do?" he whispered, not really meaning for anyone to hear him. "What did I do... why did they send me here?"

Newt clapped him on the shoulder. "Greenie, what you're feelin' we've all felt it. We've all had First Day come out of that dark box. Things are bad, they are, and they'll get much worse for ya soon, that's the truth. But down the road a piece, you'll be fightin' true and good. I can tell you're not a bloody sissy."

"Is this a prison?" Thomas asked, he dug in the darkness of his thoughts, trying to find a crack to his past.

"Done asked four questions, haven't ya?" Newt replied. "No good answers for ya, not yet, anyway. Best be quiet now, accept the change - morn comes tomorrow."

Thomas said nothing, his head sunk, his eyes staring at the cracked, rocky ground. A line of small-eared weasels ran along the edge of one of the stone blocks, tiny yellow flowers peeping through as if searching for the sun, and disappeared behind the enormous walls of the Glade.

"Chuck, it be a good fit for ya," Newt said. "We'll tie the fat

shank, but not sap when al s said and done. Stay here. I'll be back."

Newt had barely finished his sentence when a sudden, piercing scream ripped through the air. High and shrill, the barely human shriek echoed across the stone courtyard. Every kid in sight turned to look towards the source. Thomas felt his blood turn to icy slush as he realised that the horrible sound came from the wooden building.

Even Newt had jumped as if startled, his forehead creasing in concern.

"Shut it," he said. "Can't the bloody Med Jocks handle that boy for ten minutes without needing my help?" He shook his head and lightly kicked Thomas on the foot. "Finn. Coochie. Tell him he's in charge of your sleeping arrangements." And then he turned and headed in the direction of the building, running.

Thomas slid down the rough face of the tree until he sat on the ground again. He shrank back against the dark and closed his eyes, wishing he could wake up from this terrible, terrible dream.

CHAPTER 3

Thomas sat there for several moments, too overwhelmed to move. He finally forced himself to look over at the haggard building. A group of boys milled around outside, glancing anxiously at the upper windows as if expecting a hideous beast to leap out in an explosion of glass and wood.

A metallic clinking sound from the branches above grabbed his attention, made him look up: a flash of silver and red light caught his eyes just before disappearing around the trunk to the other side. He scrambled to his feet and walked around the tree, craning his neck for a sign of whatever he'd heard, but he saw only bare branches, grey and brown, poking out like skeleton fingers – and looking just as alive.

"That was one of them beede blades," someone said.

Thomas turned to his right to see a kid staring nearby, short and podgy, staring at him. He was young – probably the youngest of any in the group he'd seen so far, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. His brown hair hung down over his ears and neck, scraping the tops of his shoulders. Blue eyes shone

through an otherwise pitiful face. Flabby and flushed.

Thomas nodded at him. "A beer? What?"

"Beer? Hah! The boy said pointing to the top of the tree. "Want that ya unless you're stupid enough to touch one of them." He paused. "Shank." He didn't sound comfortable saying the last word as if he hadn't quite grasped the usage of the Glade.

Another scream – his one long and nerve grinding, rose through the air and Thomas's heart jerked. The fear was like icy dew on his skin. "What's going on over there?" he asked, pointing at the building.

"Don't know," the chubby boy replied. His voice still carried the high pitch of childhood. "Bens is there. Sicker than a dog. *They* got him."

"*They*?" Thomas didn't like the casual way the boy had said the word.

"Yeah."

"Who are *They*?"

"Better hope you never find out," the kid answered, looking far too comfortable for the situation. He held out his hand. "My name's a hick – was the Greenbean, but you showed up."

This is my grade for the night, Thomas thought. He could not shake this extreme discomfort and now another crept in as well. Nothing made sense. His head hurt.

"Why is everyone calling me Greenbean?" he asked, shaking Cluck's hand quickly, as if letting go.

"Cuz ya are the newest Newbie," Cluck pointed at Thomas and laughed. Another scream came from the house, a sound like a starving animal being tortured.

"How can you be laughing?" Thomas asked, horrified by the noise. "It sounds like someone's dying in there."

"Huh? No, uh. No one dies if they make it back. It me to get the Ben m... its a... or... r... ng. Dead or not dead. Just hurts a lot."

This gave Thomas pause. "What hurts a lot?"

Chuck's eyes wandered as if he wasn't sure what to say. "Ungettin' stung by the Grievors."

"Grievors?" Thomas was only getting more and more confused. *Sung Grievors*. The words had a heavy weight of dread to them and he suddenly wasn't so sure he wanted to know what Chuck was talking about.

Chuck shrugged then looked away, eyes to Ling.

Thomas sighed in frustration and leaned back against the tree. "Looks like you barely know more than I do," he said but he knew it wasn't true. His memory loss was strange. He mostly remembered the workings of the world but emptied of specifics, faces, names. Like a book completely intact but missing one word in every dozen making it a miserable and confusing read. He didn't even know his age.

"Chuck, how old do you think I am?"

The boy scanned him up and down. "I'd say you're sixteen. And in case you were wondering, one more seventy five brown hair. Oh, and ugly as freckles ever on a stick." He snorted a laugh.

Thomas was so stunned he'd barely heard the last part. Sixteen? He was *sixteen*. He felt much older than that.

"Are you serious?" He paused, searching for words. How? He didn't even know what to ask.

Don't worry. You'll be all whacked for a few days, but then you'll get used to this place. I have. We live here, this is it. Better than living in a pile of kank." He squinted, maybe a little pausing Thomas's question. "Klunk's another word, or poo. Poo makes a klunk sound when it falls in our pee pots."

Thomas looked at Chuck, unable to believe he was having this conversation. "That's nice," was all he could manage. He stood up and walked past Chuck towards the "house", *shuck* was a better word for the place. It looked three or four storeys high and about to fall down at any moment. A crazy assortment of logs and boards and thick twine and windows seemingly thrown together at random. The massive ivy's grown

stone walls rising up behind it. As he moved across the courtyard, the distinct smell of firewood and some kind of meat cooking made his stomach grumble. Knowing now that it was just a sick kid doing the screaming made Thomas feel better. Until he thought about what had caused it.

"What's your name?" Chuck asked from behind, running to catch up.

"What?"

"Your *name*?" He still haven't told us — and I know you remember that much."

"Thomas." He barely heard himself say it — his thoughts had spun in a new direction. If Chuck was right, he'd just discovered a link to the rest of the boys. A common pattern in their memory losses. They all remembered their names. Why not their parents' names? Why not a friend's name? Why not their *last* names?

"Nice to meet you, Thomas," Chuck said. "Don't you worry — I take care of you. I've been here a while now, and I know the place inside and out. You can count on Chuck, okay?"

Thomas had almost reached the front door of the shack and the small group of boys congregating there when he was hit by a sudden and surprise rush of anger. He turned to face Chuck.

"You can't even *tell* me anything. I won't let that taking care of me." He turned back towards the door, intent on going inside to find some answers. Where this sudden courage and resolve came from, he had no idea.

Chuck shrugged. "Nothin' I say'll do you any good," he said. "I'm basically still a Newbie too. But I can be your friend—"

"I don't need friends," Thomas interrupted.

He'd reached the door, an ugly slab of sun-baked wood, and he pulled it open to see several stoic-faced boys standing at the foot of a crooked staircase: the steps and railings twisted and angled in all directions. Dark wallpaper covered the walls of the

foyer and half way half of it peeling off. The only decorations in sight were a dusty vase on a three-legged table and a black and-white picture of an ancient woman dressed in an old fashioned white dress. It reminded Thomas of a haunted house from a movie or something. There were even planks of wood missing from the floor.

The place reeked of dust and mildew – a big contrast to the pleasant smells outside. Flickering fluorescent lights shone from the ceiling. He hadn't thought of it yet, but he had to wonder where the electricity came from in a place like the Glade. He stared at the old woman in the picture. Had she lived here once? Taken care of these people?

Hey look it's the Greenbean, one of the older boys called out. With a start, Thomas realized it was the black haired guy who'd given him the look of death earlier. He looked like he was fifteen or so tall, and skinny. His nose was the size of a small hat and resembled a deformed potato. "This shank probably kunked his pants when he heard our Benny baby scream like a girl. Need a new nappy shuck, ace?"

"My names Thomas." He had to get away from this guy. Without another word, he made for the stairs, only because they were close, only because he had no idea what to do or say. But the bully stepped in front of him, holding a hand up.

"Hold on there, Greenie." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the upper floor. "Newbies aren't allowed to see someone who's been *taken*. News and Abby want a row at."

"What's your problem?" Thomas asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice, trying not to think what he had had meant by *taken*. "I don't even know where I am. All I want is some help."

"Listen to me, Greenbean." The boy wrinkled up his face, folded his arms. "I've seen you before. Sometimes I can't see you showing up here, and I'm gonna find out what."

A surge of heat passed through Thomas's veins. "I've never seen you before in my life. I have no idea who you are, and

couldn't care less." he spat. But really, how would he know. And how could this kid remember *him*?

The bully sniggered, a short burst of laughter mixed with a phlegmy filled snort. Then his face grew serious, his eyebrows slanting forward. "I've *seen* you, shank. Not too many in these parts can say they've been *stung*." He pointed up the stairs. "I have. I know what old Benny baby's going through. I've been there. And I saw *you* during the *Changung*."

He reached out and poked Thomas in the chest. "And I bet your first meal from Frypantha Benny'll say he's seen *ya*, too."

Thomas refused to break eye contact, but decided to say nothing. "I'll eat it if I *can* once again. We *shank* things ever stop getting worse?"

"Griever got ya we tin' yourself?" the boy said through a sneer. "A little scared now. Ya don't wanna go *stung*, do ya?"

There was that word again. *Stung*. Thomas tried not to think about it and pointed up the stairs, from where the groans of the sick had echoed through the hallway. "I Newt went up there, then I wanna talk to him."

The boy said nothing, stared at Thomas for several seconds. Then he shook his head. "You know what. You're right. Is now. I sh *want* he so mean to Newbies. Go *stung* *stung* and I'm sure Abby and Newt if I you p *stung* *stung* go on I'm sorry."

He lightly slapped Thomas's shoulder, then stepped back, gesturing up the stairs. But Thomas knew the kid was up something. Losing parts of your memory *don't* make you an idiot.

"What's your name?" Thomas asked, staring for a moment while he tried to decide if he should go up *stung* *stung*.

"Calv. And don't let anyone fool you. I'm the real leader here, not the two gutter shanks upstairs. Me. You can call me Captain Calv if you want." He smiled for the first time, his teeth matched his disgusting nose. Two or three were missing, and the single one approached anything close to the color of

where. His breath escaped just enough for Thomas to get a whiff reminding him of some horrible memory that was just out of reach. It made his stomach turn.

"Okay," he said, so sick of the guy, he wanted to scream, punch him in the face. "Captain Gally, it is." He exaggerated a salute, feeling a rush of adrenaline as he knew he'd just crossed a line.

A few sniggers escaped the crowd, and Gally looked around, his face bright red. He peered back at Thomas, hatred furrowing his brow and crinkling his monstrous nose.

"Just go up the stairs," Gally said. "And stay away from me, you little sandhead." He pointed up again and didn't take his eyes off Thomas.

"Fine." Thomas looked around one more time, embarrassed, confused, angry. He felt the heat of blood in his face. No one made a move to step in or to do as Gally asked except for Chuck, who stood at the front door shaking his head.

"You're not supposed to," the younger boy said. "You're a Newbie, you can go up there."

"Go," said Gally with a sneer. "Go on up."

Thomas regretted having come inside in the first place. Why he *did* want to talk to that Newbie guy.

He started up the stairs. Each step groaned and creaked under his weight; he might've stopped for fear of falling through the rot wood. He weren't eating such an awkward situation below. Up he went, wincing at every splintered sound. The stairs reached a landing, turned left, then came upon a raised hallway leading to several rooms. Only one door had a light coming through the crack at the bottom.

"The Changing!" Gally shouted from below. "Look forward to it, shuck-face!"

As the talking gave Thomas a sudden burst of courage, he walked over to the door, ignoring the creaking floorboards and laughter downstairs, ignoring the onslaught of

words he didn't understand, suppressing the dreadful feelings they induced. He reached down, turned the brass handle, and opened the door.

Inside the room, Newt and Alby crouched over someone lying on a bed.

Thomas leaned in closer to see what the fuss was all about, but when he got a clear look at the condition of the patient, his heart went cold. He had to fight the bile that surged up his throat.

The look was not only a few seconds, but it was enough to haunt him for ever. A twisted, pale figure writhing in agony, chest bare and hideous. Tight, rigid cords of sick, green veins webbed across the boy's body and limbs, like ropes under his skin. Purpleish bruises covered the kid, red hives, bloody scratches. His bloodshot eyes bulged, staring back and forth. The image had already burned into Thomas's mind before Alby hurried up, blocking the view but not the moans and screams, pushing Thomas out of the room, then slamming the door shut behind them.

"What're you doing up here, Greenie?" Alby yelled, his lips taut with anger, eyes on fire.

Thomas felt weak. "I just want some answers," he murmured, but he couldn't put any strength in his words. He just couldn't give up inside. What was wrong with that kid? Thomas slouched against the railing in the hallway and stared at the floor, not sure what to do next.

"Get your rumpcheeks down those stairs right now," Alby roared. "Cluck! He'll pay you. If I see you again before tomorrow morning, you won't see another one alive. I'll throw you off the Cliff myself, you get me?"

Thomas was humiliated and scared. He felt like he'd shrunk to the size of a small rat. Without saying a word, he pushed past Alby and headed down the creaky steps, going as fast as he dared. Ignoring the gaping stares of everyone at the sick room, especially Gail, he walked out the door, pushing Cluck by the

arm as he did so.

Thomas hated these people. He hated a lot of them. Except Chuck. "Get me away from these guys," Thomas said. He realised that Chuck might actually be his only friend in the world.

"You go on," Chuck repeated, his voice chipper as if thrilled to be needed. "But first we should get you some food from Frypan."

"I don't know if I can ever eat again." Not after what he'd just seen.

Chuck nodded. "Yeah, you will. I'll meet you at the same tree as before. Ten minutes."

Thomas was more than happy to get away from the house and headed back towards the tree. He'd only known what it was like to be alive here for a short while and he already wanted it to end. He wished for all the world he could remember something about his previous life. Anything. His mum, his dad, a friend, his school, a hobby. A girl.

He blinked hard several times, trying to get the image of what he'd just seen in the shack out of his mind.

The Changing Galaxy had called it the Changing.

It wasn't cold, but Thomas shuddered once again.

CHAPTER 4

Thomas leaned against the tree as he waited for Chuck. He scanned the compound of the Glade, this new place of nightmares where he seemed destined to live. The shadows from the walls had lengthened considerably, already creeping up the sides of the ivy-covered stone faces on the other side.

At least this helped Thomas know directions: the wooden building crouched in the northwest corner, wedged in a darkening patch of shadow; the grove of trees in the southwest. The farm area, where a few workers were still picking their way through the fields, spread across the entire northern quarter of the Glade. The animals were in the southeast corner, mooing and crowing and baying.

In the exact middle of the courtyard, the still-gaping hole of the flux lay open, as if inviting him to jump back in and go home. Near it, at maybe six metres to the south, stood a small building made of rough concrete blocks, a menacing iron door its only entrance: there were no windows. A large red flag

handle resembling a steel steering wheel marked the only way to open the door just like something within a submarine. Despite what he'd just seen, Thomas didn't know which he felt more strongly - curiosity to know what was inside, or dread at finding out.

Thomas had just moved his attention to the four vault openings in the middle of the main walls of the Crade when Chuck arrived: a couple of sandwiches cradled in his arms, a bag with apples and two metal cups of water. The sense of relief that flooded through Thomas surprised him - he wasn't *completely* alone in this place.

"Erypan wasn't too happy about me invading his kitchen before supper time." Chuck said, sitting down next to the tree molong to Thomas to do the same. He did, grabbed the sandwich he'd hesitated the writing, monstrous rage at what he'd seen in the shack popping back into his mind. Soon, though, his hunger won out and he took a huge bite. The wonderful tastes of meat and cheese and mayonnaise filled his mouth.

"Ah, man," Thomas mumbled through a mouthful. "I was starving."

"Told ya." Chuck chomped into his own sandwich.

After another couple of bites, Thomas finally asked the question that had been bothering him. "What's all this *staring* with that Ben guy? He doesn't even look human anymore."

Chuck glanced over at the house. "Don't really know," he muttered absently. "I didn't see him."

Thomas could feel the boy was being less than honest, but decided not to press him. "Well, you don't want to see him, trust me." He continued to eat, munching on the apples as he studied the huge breaks in the walls. Though it was hard to make out from where he sat, there was something odd about the stone edges of the exits to the outside corridors. He felt an uncomfortable sense of vertigo looking at the towering walls as if he hovered above them instead of sitting at their base.

"What's out there?" he asked, finally breaking the silence.
"Is this part of a huge castle or something?"

Chuck hesitated. Looked uncomfortable. "Um, I've never been outside the Glade."

Thomas paused. "You're hiding something," he finally replied, finishing off his last bite and taking a long swig of water. The frustration at getting no answers from anyone was starting to grind his nerves. It only made it worse to think that, even if he *did* get answers, he wouldn't know if he'd be getting the truth. "Why are you guys so secretive?"

"That's just the way it is. Things are really weird around here, and most of us don't know everything, a *little* of everything."

It bothered Thomas that Chuck didn't seem to care about what he'd just said. That he seemed indifferent to having his life taken away from him. What was wrong with these people? Thomas got to his feet and started walking towards the eastern opening. "Well, no one said I couldn't look around." He needed to learn something or he was going to lose his mind.

"Whoa, wait!" Chuck cried, turning to catch up. "Be careful, those puppies are about to close!" he already sounded out of breath.

"Close?" Thomas repeated. "What are you talking about?"

"The Doors, you shank."

"Doors? I don't see any doors." Thomas knew Chuck wasn't just making stuff up—he knew he was missing something obvious. He grew uneasy and realised he'd slowed his pace, not so eager to reach the walls any more.

"What do you call those big openings?" Chuck pointed up at the enormously tall gaps in the walls. They were only ten metres away now.

"I'd call them *big openings*," Thomas said, trying to counter his discomfort with sarcasm and disappointed that it wasn't working.

"Well, they're *doors*. And they close up every night."

Thomas stopped, thinking Chuck had to have said something wrong. He looked up, looked side to side, examined the massive slabs of stone as the uneasy feeling blossomed into outright dread. "What do you mean, they *close*?"

"Just see for yourself in a minute. The Runners'll be back soon, then those big walls are going to *move* until the gaps are closed."

"You're jacked in the head." Thomas muttered. He couldn't see how the mammoth walls could possibly be mobile. For so sure of it he relaxed, thinking Chuck was just playing a trick on him.

They reached the huge spat that led outside to more stone pathways. Thomas gaped, his mind empty, going through it as he saw it all firsthand.

"This is called the East Door," Chuck said, as if proudly revealing a piece of art he'd created.

Thomas barely heard him, shocked by how much bigger it was up close. At least six metres across, the break in the wall went all the way to the top, far above. The edges that bordered the vast opening were smooth, except for one odd, repeating pattern on both sides. On the left side of the East Door, deep holes, several centimetres in diameter and spaced thirty centimetres apart, were bored into the rock, beginning near the ground and continuing all the way up.

On the right side of the Door, rods thirty centimetres long and ten in diameter, jutting out from the wall edge, in the same pattern as the holes facing them on the other side. The purpose was obvious.

"Are you kidding?" Thomas asked, the dread slamming back into his gut. "You weren't playing with me? The walls really *move*?"

"What else would I have meant?"

Thomas had a hard time wrapping his mind around the possibility. "I don't know. I figured there was a door that swung shut or a little mini-wall that slid out of the big one. How could

those walls move? They're huge, and they look like they've been standing here for a thousand years." And the sea of those walls closing and trapping him inside this place they called the Glade was downright terrifying.

Chuck threw his arms up, clearly frustrated. "I don't know they just move. Makes one heck of a grinding noise. Same thing happens out in the Maze—those walls shift every night, too."

Thomas' attention suddenly snapped up by a new detail, carried to face the younger boy. "What do you just say?"

"Hub?"

"You just called it a maze—you said same thing happens out in the *maze*!"

Chuck's face reddened. "I'm done with you. I'm done." He walked back towards the tree they'd just left.

Thomas ignored him, more interested than ever in the outside of the Glade. A *maze*? In terms of him, through the Last Door he could make out passages leading to the left, to the right, and straight ahead. And the walls of the corridors were similar to those that surrounded the Glade: the ground made of the same massive stone blocks as in the courtyard. The ivy seemed even thicker out there. In the distance, more breaks in the walls led to other paths, and farther down, maybe a hundred metres or so away, the straight passage came to a dead end.

"It looks like a maze." Thomas whispered, almost laughing to himself. As if things couldn't have got any stranger. He'd wiped his memory and put him inside a gigantic maze. It was a little crazy, it really did seem funny.

His heart skipped a beat when a boy unexpectedly appeared around a corner up ahead, entering the main passage from one of the offshoots to the right, running towards him and the Glade. Covered in sweat, his face red, clothes sticking to his body, the boy didn't so much as glance at Thomas as he went past. He headed straight for the squat, concrete building located near the Box.

Thomas turned as he passed, his eyes riveted to the exhausted runner unsure why his new development surprised him so much. Why *wouldn't* people go out and search the maze? Then he realized others were entering through the remaining three Gade openings, all of them running and looking as ragged as the guy who'd just whisked by him. There couldn't be much good about the maze if these guys came back looking so weary and worn.

He watched, curious, as they met at the big iron door of the small building, one of the boys turned the rusty wheel handle, granting with the effort. Chuck had said something about runners earlier. What had they been doing in there?

The big door finally popped open, and with a deafening squeal of metal against metal, the boys swung it wide. They disappeared inside, pulling it shut behind them with a loud clunk. Thomas stared, his mind struggling to come up with any possible explanation for what he'd just witnessed. Nothing developed, but something about that creepy old building gave him goose bumps, a disgusting chill.

Someone tugged on his sleeve, breaking him from his thoughts, Chuck had come back.

Before Thomas had a chance to think, questions were rushing out of his mouth. "Who are those guys and what were they doing? What's in that building?" He wheeled around and pointed out the East Door. "And why do you live inside a freaking maze?" He felt a rattling pressure of uncertainty making his head splinter with pain.

"I'm not saying another word," Chuck replied, a new authority filling his voice. "I think you should get to bed early, you need your sleep. Ah," he stopped, held up a finger, propping up his right ear. "It's about to happen."

"What?" Thomas asked, thinking it kind of strange that Chuck was suddenly acting like an adult instead of the little kid desperate for a friend he'd been only moments earlier.

A loud boom exploded through the air, making Thomas

, amp. It was followed by a horrible crutching grinding sound. He stumbled backwards, fell to the ground. It felt as if the whole earth shook, he looked around, panicked. The walls were closing. The walls were *really* closing, trapping him inside the Glade. An onrushing sense of claustrophobia stifled him, compressed his lungs, as if water filled the cavities.

"Calm down, Greenie." Chuck yelled over the noise. "It's just the walls!"

Thomas barely heard him, too fascinated, too shaken by the closing of the Doors. He scrambled to his feet and took a few retreating steps back for a better view, finding it hard to believe what his eyes were seeing.

The enormous stone wall, to the right of them, seemed to defy every known law of physics as it slid along the ground, throwing sparks and dust as it moved, rock against rock. The crutching sound rattled his bones. Thomas realised that only *that* wall was moving, heading for its neighbour to the left, ready to seal shut with its protruding rods slipping into the aligned holes across from it. He looked around at the other openings, but to him his head was spinning faster than his body, and his stomach flipped over with the dizziness. On all four sides of the Glade, only the right walls were moving, towards the left, closing the gap of the Doors.

Impossible he thought, *how can they do that*. He brought his arms to run out there, slip past the moving slabs of rock before they shut, see the Glade. Common sense won out, the maze held even more unknowns than his situation inside.

He tried to picture in his mind how the structure of the wall worked. Massive stone walls, over a hundred metres high, moving like sliding glass doors – an image from his past life flashed through his thoughts. He tried to grasp the memory, held on to it, complete the picture with faces, names, a place, but it faded into obscurity. A pang of sadness pricked through his other swirling emotions.

He watched as the right wall reached the end of its journey

its connecting rolls finding the r mark and entering without a glitch. An echoing boom rumbled across the Cade as all four Doors sealed shut for the night. Thomas left one final moment of trepidation: a quick slice of fear through his body, and then it vanished.

A surprising sense of calm eased his nerves: he let out a long sigh of relief. "Wow," he said, feeling dumb at such a monumental understatement.

"Aint nothin' as Alby would say," Chuck murmured. "You kind of get used to it after a while."

Thomas looked around one more time, the *feel* of the place completely different now that all the walls were solid with no way out. He tried to imagine the purpose of such a thing, and he didn't know which guess was worse—that they were being sealed *in* or that they were being protected from something *out there*. The thought ended his brief moment of calm, stirring in his mind a million possibilities of what might live in the maze outside, all of them terrifying. Fear gripped him once again.

"Come on," Chuck said, pulling at Thomas's sleeve a second time. "Trust me: when night-time strikes, you want to be in *bed*."

Thomas knew he had no other choice. He did his best to suppress everything he was feeling and followed.

CHAPTER 5

They ended up near the back of the Homestead—that was what Chuck called the leaning structure of wood and windows—in a dark nook between the building and the stone wall behind it.

"Where are we going?" Thomas asked, still feeling the weight of seeing Chase walk close, thinking about the maze the captives on the ear. He told himself to stop or he'd drive himself crazy. Trying to grasp a sense of normalcy, he made a weak attempt at a joke: "If you're looking for a goodnight kiss, forget it."

Chuck didn't miss a beat. "Just sleep and stay close."

Thomas exhaled a long breath and shrugged before following the younger boy along the back of the building. They tiptoed and they came upon a small, dusty window, a soft beam of light shining through onto the stone and ivy. Thomas heard someone moving around inside.

"The bathroom," Chuck whispered.

"So?" A thread of unease stitched itself along Thomas's skin.

"I love doing this to people. Gives me great pleasure before bedtime."

"Doing what?" Something told Thomas Chuck was up to no good. "Maybe I should—"

"Just shut your mouth and watch." Chuck quickly scrambled up onto a big wooden box that sat right under the window. He crouched so that his head was positioned just below where the person on the inside would be able to see him. Then he reached up with his hand and lightly tapped on the glass.

"That is stupid." Thomas whispered. There couldn't possibly be a worse time to play a joke. Newt or Abby would be in there. "I don't wanna get in trouble. I've only just got here."

Chuck suppressed a laugh by putting his hand over his mouth. Ignoring Thomas, he reached up and tapped the window again.

A shadow crossed the light then the window suddenly opened. Thomas jumped to hide, pressing himself against the back of the sliding glass door as well as he could. He just couldn't believe he'd been suckered into playing a practical joke on somebody. The angle of vision from the window protected him for the moment, but he knew he and Chuck would be seen if whoever was in there pushed his head outside to get a better look.

"Who's that?" yelled the boy from the bathroom, his voice scratchy and laced with anger. Thomas had to hold in a gasp when he realised it was Gally. He *knew* that voice already.

Without warning, Chuck suddenly popped his head up towards the window and screamed at the top of his lungs. A loud crash from inside revealed that the trick had worked—and the stony of swearwords following it let them know Gally was none too happy about it. Thomas was struck with an odd mix of horror and embarrassment.

"I'm gonna kill you, shuck face!" Gally yelled, but Chuck was already off the box and running towards the open door. Thomas froze as he heard Gally open the door inside and run out of the bathroom.

Thomas finally snapped out of his daze and took off after his new - and only - friend. He'd just rounded the corner when Galy came screaming out of the Homestead, looking like a ferocious beast on the loose.

He immediately pointed at Thomas "Come here," he yelled.

Thomas's heart sank in surrender. Everything seemed to indicate that he'd be getting a fist in the face. "It wasn't me, I swear," he said, though as he stood there he sized the boy up and realised he shouldn't be so terrified after all. Galy wasn't that big. Thomas could actually take him if he had to.

"Wasn't you?" Galy snarled. He ambled up to Thomas slowly and stopped right in front of him. "Then how'd you know there was something you didn't do?"

Thomas didn't say anything. He was definitely a teen terror, but not nearly as scared as he had been a few moments earlier.

"I'm not a dong, Greene," Galy spat. "I saw a buck's ear flick in the window." He pointed again, this time right at Thomas's chest. "But you better decide right quick who you want as your friend as this comes ya hear me? I'm more tick like this - I don't care if it is your ass, y'idea or not - there'll be blood spilled. You got that, Newbie?" But before Thomas could answer Galy had already turned to walk away.

Thomas just wanted this episode over. "Sorry," he muttered, wincing at how stupid it sounded.

"I know you," Galy added without looking back. "I saw you in the Changing, and I'm gonna figure out who you are."

Thomas watched as the boy disappeared back into the Homestead. He couldn't remember much, but something told him he'd never disliked someone so strongly. He was surprised by how much he truly hated the guy. He really, really hated him. He turned to see Chuck standing there, staring at the ground, clearly embarrassed. "Thanks a lot, *buddy*."

"Sorry. I didn't know it was Galy. I never would've done it, I swear."

Surprising himself, Thomas laughed. An hour ago, he'd thought he'd never hear such a sound come out of his mouth again.

Chuck looked closely at Thomas and slowly broke into an uneasy grin. "What?"

Thomas shook his head. "Don't be sorry. The shank deserved it, and I don't even know what a shank is. That was awesome." He felt much better.

A couple of hours later, Thomas was lying in a soft sleeping bag next to Chuck on a bed of grass near the gardens. It was a wide lawn that he hadn't noticed before, and quite a few of the group chose it as their bedtime spot. Thomas thought that was strange, but apparently there wasn't enough room inside the Homestead. At least it was warm. Which made him wonder for the millionth time *where* they were. His mind had a hard time grasping names of places, or remembering countries or rulers, how the world was organized. And none of the kids in the Gade had a clue, either. Or at least, they weren't sharing if they did.

He lay in silence for the longest time, looking at the stars and listening to the soft murmurs of various conversations drifting across the Gade. Sleep felt miles away, and he couldn't shake the despair and hopelessness that coursed through his body and mind. The temporary joy of Chuck's trick on a day had long since faded away. It'd been one endless and strange day.

It was just so... weird. He remembered bits of little things about life - eating, clothes, studying, playing, general images of the makeup of the world. But any detail that would fill in the picture to create a true and complete memory had been erased somehow. It was like looking at an image through a film made of muddy water. More than anything else, perhaps, he felt *sad*.

Chuck interrupted his thoughts. "Well, Greenie was a *Survived First Day*."

"Barely." *No, now Chuck* he wanted to say *I'm not in the mood.*

Chuck pulled himself up to lean on an elbow, looking at Thomas. "You'll learn a lot in the next couple of days. start getting used to things. Good that?"

"Um, yeah, good that I guess. Where'd all these weird words and phrases come from anyway?" It seemed like they'd stolen some other language and muddled it with his own.

Chuck flopped back down with a heavy flump. "I don't know. I've only been here a month, remember."

Thomas wondered about Chuck, whether he knew more than he let on. He was a quirky kid, funny, and he seemed innocent, but who was to say? Really he was just as mysterious as everything else in the Glade.

A few minutes passed, and Thomas felt the long day finally catch up with him, the leaden edge of sleep crossing over his mind. But... like a fist had shoved it in his brain and emerged a thought popped in his head. One that he didn't expect, and he wasn't sure from where it came.

Suddenly the Glade, he was, the Maze itself seemed familiar, comfortable. A warmth of calmness spread through his chest, and for the first time since he'd found himself there, he didn't feel like the Glade was the worst place in the universe. He stood, felt his eyes widen, his breathing stop for a long moment. *What just happened?* he thought. *What changed?* Ironically the feeling that things would be okay made him slightly uneasy.

Not quite understanding how, he knew what he needed to do. He did it again. The feeling... the calmness was a strange one, foreign and familiar at the same time. But it felt... right.

"I want to be one of those guys that goes out there," he said aloud, not knowing if Chuck was still awake. "Inside the Maze."

"Huh." was the response from Chuck. Thomas could hear a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

"Runners " Thomas said wishing he knew where this was coming from. "Whatever they're doing out there, I want in."

"You don't even know what you're talking about " Chuck grumbled, and rolled over "Go to sleep"

Thomas felt a new surge of confidence even though he truly *didn't* know what he was talking about "I want to be a Runner."

Chuck turned back and got up on his elbow. "You can forget that little thought right now"

Thomas wondered at Chuck's reaction but pressed on. "Don't try to—"

"Thomas Newline My new friend Forget it"

"I'll tell Alby tomorrow " *A Runner* Thomas thought *I don't even know what that means Have I gone completely insane?*

Chuck lay down with a laugh. "You're a piece of kunk Go to sleep"

But Thomas couldn't quit "Something out there it feels familiar."

"Go to sleep."

Then it hit Thomas he felt like several pieces of a puzzle had been put together He didn't know what the ultimate picture would be but his next words almost felt like they were coming from someone else "Chuck, I—I think I've been here before."

He heard his friend sit up heard the intake of breath But Thomas rolled over and refused to say another word worried he'd mess up this new sense of being encouraged emanate the reassuring calm that filled his heart

Sleep came much more easily than he'd expected

CHAPTER 6

Someone shook Thomas awake. His eyes snapped open to see a too-close face staring down at him, everything around them still shadowed by the darkness of early morning. He opened his mouth to speak but a cold hand clamped down on it, gripping it shut like a flare until he saw who it was.

"Shh, Greenie. Don't wanna be wakin' Jackie now do we?"

It was Newt—the guy who settled to be second in command, the air reeked of his morning breath.

Enough. Thomas was surprised any alarm melted away immediately. He couldn't help being curious, wondering what this boy wanted with him. Thomas nodded, doing his best to say yes with his eyes, until Newt finally took his hand away then leaned back on his heels.

"Come on, Greenie," the tall boy whispered as he stood. He reached down and helped Thomas to his feet—he was so strong it felt like he could rip Thomas apart. "Supposed to show ya some of the area. Be wakin' up."

Any lingering haze of sleep had already vanished from Thomas' mind. "Okay," he said simply, ready to follow. He knew he should hold *some* suspicion, having no reason to trust anyone yet, but the curiosity won out. He quickly leaned over and tapped on his shoes. "Where are we going?"

"Just to law me. And stay close."

They snuck their way through the tightly strewn pack of sleeping bodies. Thomas almost tripping several times. He stepped on someones hand, earning a sharp cry of pain in return, then a punch on the calf.

"Sorry," he whispered, ignoring a dirty look from Newt.

Once they left the lawn area and stepped onto the hard grey stone of the courtyard floor, Newt broke into a run, heading for the western wall. Thomas hesitated at first, wondering why he needed to run, but snapped out of it quickly and followed at the same pace.

The light was dim, but any obstructions loomed as darker shadows and he was able to make his way quickly along. He stopped when Newt did, right next to the massive wall, towering above them like a skyscraper – another random image that floated in the murky pool of his memory wipe. Thomas noticed small red lights flashing here and there along the wall's face, moving about stopping, turning off and on.

"What are those?" he whispered as loud as he dared, wondering if his voice sounded as shaky as he felt. The twinkling red glow of the lights held an undercurrent of warning.

Newt stood just over half a metre in front of the thick curtain of ivy on the wall. "When you bloody need to know, you'll know, Greenie."

"Well, it's kind of stupid to send me to a place where nothing makes sense and not answer my questions." Thomas paused, surprised at himself. "Shunk," he added, throwing all the sarcasm he could into the syllable.

Newt broke out in a laugh, but quickly cut it off. "I like you, Greenie. Now shut it and let me show ya something."

Newt stepped forward and dug his hands into the thick ivy spreading several vines away from the wall to reveal a dust-frayed window, a square about half a metre wide. It was dark at the moment, as if it had been painted black.

"What're we looking for?" Thomas whispered.

"Hold your hands, boy. One, be calm, along soon enough."

A minute passed, then two, several more. Thomas fingered on his seat, wondering how Newt could stand there, perfectly patient and still staring into nothing but darkness.

Then it changed.

Flimmers of an eerie light shone through the window, a cast a wavering spectrum of colours on Newt's body and face, as if he stood next to a lighted swimming pool. Thomas grew perfectly still, squinting, trying to make out what was on the other side. A thick lump grew in his throat. *What is that?* he thought.

"(I)it there's the Maze," Newt whispered, eyes wide as far as a trance. "Everything we do, our whole life, Greenie, revolves around the Maze. Every loving second of every loving day we spend in honour of the Maze, trying to solve something that's not shown us. It has a bloody solution, ya know? And we want to show ya why it's no to be messed with. Show ya why the n'bugger n' wall's close shut every night. Show ya why you should never, never find your butt out there."

Newt stepped back, still hanging on to the ivy vines. He gestured for Thomas to take his place and look through the window.

Thomas did, leaning forward until his nose touched the cold surface of the glass. It took a second for his eyes to focus on the moving object on the other side, to look past the grime and dust and see what Newt wanted him to see. And when he did, he felt his breath catch in his throat. Like an icy wind had blown down there and frozen the air so id.

A large, bulbous creature the size of a cow but with no

distinct shape twisted and seethed along the ground in the corridor outside. It climbed the opposite wall, then leaped at the thick glassed window with a loud thump. Thomas shrieked before he could stop himself, jerked away from the window – but the thing bounced backwards, leaving the glass undamaged.

Thomas sucked in two huge breaths and leaned in once again. It was too dark to make out clearly, but odd lights flashed from an unknown source, revealing blurs of silver spikes and glistening flesh. Wicked instrument-tipped appendages protruded from its body like arms: a saw blade, a set of shears, long rods whose purpose could only be guessed.

The creature was a horrific mix of animal and machine and seemed to realise it was being observed, seemed to know what lay inside the walls of the Glade, seemed to want to get inside and feast on human flesh. Thomas felt an icy terror blossom in his chest, expand like a tumour, making it hard to breathe. Even with the memory wipe, he felt sure he'd never seen something so truly awful.

He stepped back, the courage he'd felt the previous evening melting away.

"What's that thing?" he asked. Something shivered in his gut, and he wondered if he'd ever be able to eat again.

"Greivers, we call 'em," Newt answered. "Nasty buggers, eh. Just be glad the Greivers only come out at night. Be thankful for these walls."

Thomas swallowed, wondering how he could ever go out there. His desire to become a Runner had taken a major blow. But he had to do it. Somehow he *knew* he had to do it. It was such an odd thing to feel, especially after what he'd just seen.

Newt looked at the window absently. "Now you know what bloody lies in the Maze, my friend. Now you know this sort of job time. You've been sent to the Glade Green, and we'll be expecting you to survive and help us do what we've been sent here to do."

"And what's that?" Thomas asked, even though he was terrified to hear the answer.

Newt turned to look him dead in the eye. The first traces of dawn had crept up on them, and Thomas could see every detail of Newt's face: his skin tight, his brow creased.

"Find our way out, Greenie," Newt said. "Solve the buggin' Maze and find our way home."

A couple of hours later, the doors having reopened, rumbling and grumbling and shaking the ground with them, they were finished. Thomas sat at a worn, tilted picnic table outside the Homestead. All he could think about was the *what-ifs*, what their purpose could be, what they did out there during the night. What it would be like to be attacked by something so terrible.

He tried to get the image out of his head, move on to something else: the Runners. They'd just left without saying a word to anybody, bounding into the Maze at full speed and disappearing around corners. He pictured them in his mind as he picked at his eggs and bacon with a fork, speaking to no one, not even Chuck, who ate silently next to him. The poor guy had exhausted himself trying to start a conversation with Thomas, who'd refused to respond. All he wanted was to be left alone.

He just didn't get it. His brain was on overload trying to compute the sheer impossibility of the situation. How could a maze with walls so massive and tall be so big that dozens of kids *have* been able to solve it, a lot who knew how *not* to try? How could such a structure exist? And more importantly, *why*? What could possibly be the purpose of such a thing? Why were they *in* there? How *long* had they been there?

Try as he might to avoid it, his mind still kept wandering back to the image of the vicious Creeper. Its phantom brother seemed to leap at him every time he blinked or rubbed his eyes.

Thomas knew he was a smart kid. He somehow felt it in his bones. But nothing about this place made any sense, except

for one thing. He was supposed to be a Runner. Why did he feel that so strongly. And even now after seeing what lived in the maze?

A tap on his shoulder jarrred him from his thoughts, he looked up to see Abby standing behind him, arms folded.

"Aint you lookin' fresh?" Abby said. "Get a nice view out the window this morning?"

Thomas stood, hoping the time for answers had come, or maybe hoping for a distraction from his gloomy thoughts. "Enough to make me want to learn about his place," he said, hoping to avoid provoking the temper he'd seen flare in this guy the day before.

Abby nodded. "Me and you, shank. The Tour begins now." He started to move, but then stopped, holding up a finger. "No questions til the end, you get me? Aint got time to daw with you all day."

"But..." Thomas stopped when Abby's eyebrows shot up. "Why'd d the guy have to be such a jerk?" "But tel me everything I wanna know everrvth'ng." He'd decided the night before not to tel anyone else how strangely familiar the place seemed, the odd feeling that he'd been there before... that he could *remember* things about it. Sharing that seemed like a very bad idea.

"Tel 'em ya what I wanna tel 'em ya, Greenie. Lets go."

"Can I come?" Chuck asked from the table.

Abby reached down and tweaked the boy's ear.

"Ow!" Chuck shrieked.

"Aint you got a job, sonthead?" Abby asked. "Lots of shoppin' to do?"

Chuck rolled his eyes, then looked at Thomas. "Have fun."

"I'll try." He suddenly felt sorry for Chuck, wished people would treat the kid better. But there was nothing he could do about it... it was time to go.

He walked away with Abby, hoping the Tour had officially begun.

CHAPTER 7

They started at the Box, which was closed at the moment. The doors—metal, lying flat on the ground, covered in white paint, faded and cracked. The day had brightened considerably, the shadows stretching in the opposite direction from what Thomas had seen yesterday. He still hadn't spotted the sun, but it looked like it was about to pop over the eastern wall at any minute.

Abby pointed down at the doors. "This here's the Box. Once a month we get a Newbie like you, never fails. Once a *week* we get supplies, clothes, some food. Don't need a lot—pretty much the necessities in the cage."

Thomas nodded, his whole body itching with the desire to ask questions. *I need some tape to put over my mouth,* he thought.

"We don't know jack about the Box, you get me?" Abby continued. "Where it came from, how it gets here, who's in charge. The shanks that sent us here ain't told us nothin'. We got all the electricity we need, grow and raise most of our food, get clothes and such. Tried to send a slathead Greenie back in the Box one

time – thing wouldn't move til we took him out."

Thomas wondered what lay under the doors when the Box wasn't there, but he a his tongue. He felt such a mixture of emotions – curiosity, frustration, wonder – allaced with the lingering horror of seeing the Griever that morning.

Abby kept talking, never bothering to look at Thomas in the eye. "Grades cut into four sections." He held up his fingers as he counted off the next four words. "Gardens. Blood House. Homestead. Deadheads. You got that?"

Thomas hesitated, then shook his head, confused.

Abby's eyelids fluttered briefly as he continued. "He looked like he could fix us a thousand things here rather than doing right then. He pointed to the northeast corner where the fields and fruit trees were located. "Gardens – where we grow the crops. Waters pumped in through pipes in the ground – always has been, or we'd have starved to death a long time ago. Never rains here. Never." He pointed to the southeast corner, at the animal pens and barn. "Blood House – where we raise and slaughter an maas." He pointed at the pretrial living quarters. "Homestead – stupid place is twice as big than when the first of us got here because we keep adding to it when they send us wood and klink. Ain't pretty, but it works. Most of us sleep outside anyway."

Thomas felt dizzy. So many questions splintered his mind that he couldn't keep them straight.

Abby pointed to the southwest corner, the forest area fronted with several sickly trees and benches. "Call that the Deadheads. Graveyard's back in that corner in the thicker woods. Ain't much else. You can go there to sit and rest hang on whatever." He cleared his throat as if wanting to change the subject. "You'd spend the next two weeks working one day each for our different job keepers – anna we know what you're best at. Sopper. Bricknick. Bagger. Track hoe – somethin I stick always does. Come on."

Abby walked towards the South Door, located between what

head called the Deadheads and the Blood House. Thomas followed, wrinkling his nose up at the sudden smelly fart and manure coming from the animal pens. *Graveyard* he thought. *Why do they need a graveyard in a place full of teenagers?* That had disturbed him even more than not knowing some of the words Abby kept saying. Words like *slopper* and *bigger*. That didn't sound so good. He came as close to interrupting Abby as he'd done so far, but closed his mouth shut.

Frustated, he turned his attention to the pens in the Blood House area.

Several cows nibbled and chewed at a trough full of greenish hay. Pigs ranged in a muddy pit, an occasionally flickering tail the only sign they were alive. Another pen held sheep, and there were chicken coops and turkey cages as well. Workers bustled about the area, looking as if they'd spent their whole lives on a farm.

Why do I remember these animals? Thomas wondered. Nothing about them seemed new or interesting. He knew what they were called, what they normally are, what they looked like. Why was that like that still lodged in his memory, but not *where* he'd seen an mals before, or with whom. His memory loss was baffling, as complex.

Abby pointed to the large barn in the back corner. Its red paint long faded to a dusty cobalt. "Back there's where the Slacers work. Nasty stuff, that. Nasty. If you like blood, you can be a Slacer."

Thomas shook his head. Slacer didn't sound good at all. As they kept walking, he focused his attention on the other side of the Glade, the section Abby had called the Deadheads. The trees grew thicker and denser the farther back in the corner they went, more alive and full of leaves. Dark shadows filled the depths of the wooded area, despite the fine, cloudy day. Thomas looked up, squinting to see that the sun was finally visible, though it looked odd—more orange than it should be. It hit him that this was yet another example of the odd selective

memory in his mind.

He returned his gaze to the Deadheads, a glowing disk still floating in his vision. Blinking to clear it away, he suddenly caught the red lights again, flickering and skittering about deep in the darkness of the woods. *What are those things?* he wondered, irritated that Abby hadn't answered him earlier. The secrecy was very annoying.

Abby stopped walking, and Thomas was surprised to see they'd reached the South Door: the two walls bracketing the exit towered above them. The thick slabs of grey stone were cracked and covered in ivy, as ancient as anything Thomas could imagine. He craned his neck to see the top of the walls far above, his mind spun with the odd sensation that he was looking *down*, not up. He staggered back a step, awed once again by the structure of his new home, then finally returned his attention to Abby, who had his back to the exit.

"Out there's the Maze." Abby jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, then paused. Thomas stared in that direction, through the gap in the walls that served as an exit from the Glade. The corridors out there looked exactly the same as the ones he'd seen from the window by the East Door early that morning. This thought gave him a chill, made him wonder if a Griever might come charging towards them at any minute. He took a step backwards before realising what he was doing. *Calm down*, he chided himself, embarrassed.

Abby continued, "Two years we've been here. As it none been here longer. The few before me are a ready dead." Thomas felt his eyes widen, his heart quicken. "Two years we've tried to solve this thing, no luck. Shuck it will move out here at night, just as much as these here doors. Mapping it out is no easy no way." He nodded towards the concrete backed banging into which the Runners had disappeared the night before.

Another stab of pain sliced through Thomas's head: there were too many things to compute at once. They'd been here two years? The walls moved out in the Maze? How many dead

died. He stepped forward, wanting to see the Maze for himself as if the answers were printed on the walls out there.

Abby held out a hand and pushed Thomas in the chest, sent him stumbling backwards. "Aint no goin' out there, shank."

Thomas had to suppress his pride. "Why not?"

"You think I sent Newt to ya before the wake-up just for kicks? Freak, that's the Number One Rule: the only one you'll never be forgiven for breakin'. Aint nobody—*nobody*—allowed in the Maze except the Runners. Break that rule and if you ain't killed by the Grievors, well, kill you ourselves, you got me?"

Thomas nodded, grumbling inside: sure that Abby was exaggerating. Hoping that he was. Either way, if he'd had any doubt about what he'd told Chuckle the night before, it had now completely vanished. He wanted to be a Runner. He *would* be a Runner. Deep inside he knew he had to go on there, into the Maze. Despite everything he'd learned and witnessed firsthand, it called to him as much as hunger or thirst.

A movement up on the left wall of the South Door caught his attention. Startled, he reacted quickly, looking up in time to see a flash of silver. A patch of ivy shook as the thing disappeared into it.

Thomas planted up against the wall. "What was that?" he asked before he could be shut down again.

Abby didn't bother looking. "No questions in the end, son. How many times I gotta tell yer?" He paused, then, at a sigh. "Beetle blades—its how the Grievors watch us. You better not—"

He was cut off by a booming, ringing alarm that sounded from all directions. Thomas clamped his hands to his ears, looking around as the siren blared, his heart about to thump its way out of his chest. But when he focused back on Abby, he stopped.

Abby wasn't acting scared—he appeared confused, surprised. The alarm changed through the air.

"What's going on?" Thomas asked. Relief flooded his chest that his tour guide didn't seem to think the world was about to end – but even so, Thomas was getting tired of being hit by waves of panic.

"That's weird," was all Abby said as he scanned the Grade squinting. Thomas noticed people in the Blood House pens glancing around, apparently lost as confused. One shouted to Abby, a short, skinny kid dressed in mud.

"What's up with that?" the boy asked, looking to Thomas for some reason.

"I don't know," Abby murmured back in a distant voice.

But Thomas couldn't stand any more. "Abby, What's going on?"

"The Box, shuck face, the Box!" was all Abby said before he set off for the middle of the Grade at a brisk pace that almost looked to Thomas like panic.

"What about it?" Thomas demanded, hurrying to catch up. *Talk to me!* he wanted to scream at him.

But Abby didn't answer or slow down, and as they got closer to the Box, Thomas could see that dozens of kids were running around the courtyard. He spotted Newt and called to him, trying to suppress his rising fear, telling himself things would be okay, that there had to be a reasonable explanation.

"Newt, what's going on?" he yelled.

Newt glanced over at him, then nodded and walked over, strangely calm in the middle of the chaos. He swatted Thomas on the back. "Means a bloody Newbies coming up in the Box." He paused as if expecting Thomas to be impressed. "Right now."

"So?" As Thomas looked more closely at Newt, he realized that what he'd mistaken for calm was actually disbelief – maybe even excitement.

"So?" Newt repeated, his jaw dropping slightly. "Greenie, we've never had two Newbies show up in the same month, much less two days in a row."

And with that, he ran off towards the Homestead.

CHAPTER 8

The alarm finally stopped after lasting for a few two minutes. A crowd was gathered in the middle of the courtyard around the steel doors through which Thomas was started to release. He'd arrived just yesterday. *Yesterday*, he thought. *Was that really just yesterday?*

Someone rapped him on the elbow, he looked over to see Chuck by his side again.

"How goes it Greenbean?" Chuck asked.

"Fine," he replied, even though nothing could've been further from the truth. He pointed towards the doors of the Box. "Why is everyone freaking out? Isn't this how you all got here?"

Chuck shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it's always been really regular. One a month, every month, same way. Maybe whoever's in charge realised you were nothing but a big mistake, sent someone to replace you." He giggled as he elbowed Thomas on the ribs, a high pitched snigger that inexplicably made Thomas like him more.

Thomas shot his new friend a fake glare. "You're annoying. Seriously."

"Yeah, but we're buddies now, right?" Chuck laughed properly this time, a squeaky sort of snort.

"Looks like you're not giving me much choice on that one." But the truth was, he needed a friend, and Chuck would do just fine.

The kid folded his arms, looking very satisfied. "Glad that's settled. Greenie. Everyone needs a buddy in this place."

Thomas grabbed Chuck by the collar, yanking around. "Okay, *buddy*. *hen* call me by my name. Thomas. Or I'll throw you down the hole after the Box leaves." That triggered a thought in his head as he released Chuck. "Wait a minute, have you guys ever—?"

"Tried it?" Chuck interrupted before Thomas could finish.

"Tried what?"

"Going down in the Box after it makes a delivery," Chuck answered. "It won't do it. Won't go down 'til it's completely empty."

Thomas remembered Alby telling him that very thing. "I already knew that, but what about...?"

"Tried it."

Thomas had to suppress a groan. This was getting irritating. "Man, you're hard to talk to. Tried what?"

"Going through the hole *after* the Box goes down. Cap'n Doors will open, but there's just emptiness, blackness, nothing. No ropes, nada. Can't do it."

How could that be possible? "Did you...?"

"Tried it."

Thomas did groan. His time. "Okay, what?"

"We threw some things into the hole. Never heard them, and it goes on for a long time."

Thomas paused before he replied, not wanting to be cut off again. "What are you a mind reader or something?" He threw as much sarcasm as he could into the comment.

"Just brilliant, that's all." Chuck winked.

"Chuck, never wink at me again." Thomas said. "With a smile. Chuck *was* a little annoying, but there was something about him that made things seem less terrible. Thomas took a deep breath and looked back towards the crowd around the hole. "So, how long until the delivery gets here?"

"Usually takes about half an hour after the alarm."

Thomas thought for a second. There *had* to be something they hadn't tried. "You're sure about the hole? Have you ever

"He paused, waiting for the interup-
tion, but none came. "Have you ever tried making a rope?"

"Yeah, they did. With the very longest one they could possibly make. Lets just say that little experiment didn't go so well."

"What do you mean?" *What now?* Thomas thought.

"I wasn't here, but I heard the kid who volunteered to do it had only gone down about three metres when something swooshed through the air and cut him clean in half."

"What?" Thomas laughed. "I don't believe that for a second."

"Oh, yeah, smart guy. I've seen the sucker's jokes. Cut in half like a knife through whipped cream. They keep him in a box to remind future kids not to be so stupid."

Thomas waited for a back to laugh or smile, thinking it had to be a joke. Who ever heard of someone being cut in half? But it never came. "You're serious?"

Chuck just stared back at him. "Don't let Cree - uh Thomas. Come on, lets go over and see what's coming up. I can believe you only have to be the Greenbean for one day. Klunkhead."

As they walked over, Thomas asked the one question he hadn't posed yet. "How do you know it's not just supplies or whatever?"

"The alarm doesn't go off when that happens," Chuck answered simply. "The supplies come up at the same time

every week. Hey, look." Chuck stopped and pointed to someone in the crowd. It was Gaily, staring dead at them.

"Shuck it," Chuck said. "He does *not* like you, man."

"Yeah," Thomas muttered. "Figured that out already." And the feeling was mutual.

Chuck nudged Thomas with his elbow and the boys resumed their walk to the edge of the crowd, then waited in silence; any questions Thomas had were forgotten. He'd lost the urge to talk after seeing Gaily.

Chuck apparently hadn't. "Why don't you go and ask him what his problems *is*," he asked, trying to sound tough.

Thomas wanted to think he was brave enough, but that currently sounded like the worst idea in history. "Well, for one, he has a lot more allies than I do. Not a good person to pick a fight with."

"Yeah, but you're smarter. And I bet you're quicker. You could take him *and* all his buddies."

One of the boys standing in front of them looked back over his shoulder, annoyance crossing his face.

Must be a friend of Gaily's. Thomas thought. "Well, you shut it?" he hissed at Chuck.

A door closed behind them. Thomas turned to see Abby and Newt heading over from the Himes' yard. They both looked exhausted.

Seeing them brought Ben back to his mind - along with the hurt he imagined of him watching. He'd. "C'mon, man, you go. Tell me what this whole hanging business is. What have they been *doing* in there with that poor Ben kid."

Chuck shrugged. "Don't know the details. The Crievers do bad things to you. Make your whole body go through something awful. When it's over, you're . . . different."

Thomas sensed a chance to finally have a solid answer. "Different? What do you mean? And what does it have to do with the Crievers? Is that what Gaily meant by 'being stung'?"

"Shh." Chuck held a finger to his mouth.

Thomas almost screamed in frustration but he kept quiet. He resolved to make Chuck tell him later whether the guy wanted to or not.

Alby and Newt had reached the crowd and pushed themselves to the front standing right over the doors that led to the Box. Everyone quietened and for the first time. Then as roused the grunts and rattles of the rising life remaining him of his own nightmarish trip the day before. Sadness washed over him almost as if he were reliving those few torturous minutes of awakening in darkness to the memory loss. He felt sorry for whoever this new kid was going through the same things.

A muffled horn announced that the bizarre life had arrived.

Thomas watched in anticipation as Newt and Alby took positions on opposite sides of the shaft doors. A thick spool of steel square right down the middle. Simple hook handles were attached on both sides, and together they yanked them apart. With a metallic scrape the doors were opened and a puff of dust from the sunbaked stone rose into the air.

Complete silence settled over the Gladers. As Newt leaned over to get a better look into the Box the soft bleating of a goat in the distance echoed across the courtyard. Thomas leaned forward as far as he possibly could hoping to get a glance at the newcomer.

With a sudden jerk Newt pushed himself back into an upright position, his face scrunched up in confusion. "Holy..." he muttered looking around at nothing in particular.

By this time Alby had got a good look as well with a similar reaction. "No way," he murmured almost in a trance.

A chorus of questions filled the air as everyone began pushing forward to get a look into the small opening. *What do they see down there?* Thomas wondered. *What do they see?* He felt a sliver of frozen fear similar to what he experienced the morning when he stepped toward the window to see the Griever.

"Hold on!" Alby yelled, silencing everyone. "Just hold on!"

"Well, what's wrong?" someone yelled back.

Alby stood up. "Two Newbies in two days," he said, almost in a whisper. "Now this. Two years, nothing different, now this." Then, for some reason, he looked straight at Thomas. "What's going on here, Green?"

Thomas stared back, confused, his face turning bright red, his gut clenching. "How am I supposed to know?"

"Why don't you just tell us what the shuck is down there, Alby?" Gally called out. There were more murmurs and another surge forward.

"You shucks shu' up!" Alby yelled. "Tell 'em, Newt."

Newt looked down in the Box one more time, then faced the crowd, gravely.

"It's a girl," he said.

Everyone started talking at once. Thomas only caught pieces here and there.

"A girl?"

"I got dibs!"

"What's she look like?"

"How old is she?"

Thomas was drowning in a sea of confusion. *A girl?* He hadn't even thought about why the Gladers only had boys, no girls. Hadn't even had the chance to notice, really. *What is she?* he wondered. *Why—?*

Newt shushed them again. "That's not the bloody half of it," he said, then pointed down into the Box. "I think she's dead."

A couple of boys grabbed some ropes made from vines and lowered Alby and Newt into the Box so they could retrieve the girl's body. A mood of reserved shock had come over most of the Gladers, who were milling about with solemn faces, kicking loose rocks and not saying much at all. No one dared admit they couldn't wait to see the girl, but Thomas assumed they were all just as curious as he was.

Calby was one of the boys holding on to the ropes, ready to hoist her. Alby and Newt out of the Box. Thomas watched him closely. His eyes were fixed with something dark—almost a sick fascination. A gleam that made Thomas suddenly more scared of him than he'd been minutes earlier.

From deep in the shaft came Alby's voice shouting that they were ready, and Calby and a couple of others started pulling up on the rope. A few grunts later and the girl's lifeless body was dragged out across the edge of the door and onto one of the stone blocks making up the ground of the Glade. Everyone immediately ran forward, forming a packed crowd around her, a palpable excitement hovering in the air. But Thomas stepped back. The eerie silence gave him the creeps, as if they'd just opened up a recently laid tomb.

Despite his own curiosity, Thomas didn't bother trying to force his way through to get a look—the bodies were too tightly squeezed together. But he *had* caught a glimpse of her before being blocked off. She was thin, but not too small. Maybe one meter seventy, from what he could see. She looked like she could be fifteen or sixteen years old, and her hair was jet black. But the thing that had really stood out to him was her skin—pale, white as pearls.

Newt and Alby scrambled out of the Box after her, then forced their way through to the girl's lifeless body, the crowd reforming behind to cut them out from Thomass' view. Only a few seconds later, the group parted again, and Newt was pointing straight at Thomas.

"Greenie get over here," he said, no bother to be polite about it.

Thomas's heart jumped into his throat, his hands started to sweat. What did they want him for? Things just kept getting worse and worse. He forced himself to walk forward, trying to see innocent without acting like someone who was guilty, who was trying to act innocent. *Oh, damn it*, he told himself. *You haven't done anything wrong.* But he had a strange feeling

that maybe he had without realising it.

The boys joining the path to Newt and the girl gazed at him as he walked past, as if he were responsible for the entire mess of the Maze and the Greedies and the Grievers. Thomas refused to make eye contact with any of them, afraid of looking guilty.

He approached Newt and Alby, who both kept their eyes on the girl. Thomas, not wanting to meet their stares, concentrated on the girl despite her paleness, she was really pretty. More than pretty. Beautiful. Silky hair, flawless skin, perfect lips, long legs. It made him sick to think that way about a dead girl, but he couldn't look away. *Won't be that way for long*, he thought with a queasy twist in his stomach. *She'll start rotting soon*. He was surprised at having such a morbid thought.

"You know this girl, stark?" Alby asked, scolding, agitated off

Thomas was shocked by the question. "*Know her?* Of course I don't know her. I don't know anyone except for you guys."

"That's not—" Alby began, then stopped with a frustrated sigh. "I meant does she look *familiar* at all? Any kind of face you've seen her before?"

"No. Nothing." Thomas shifted, looked down at his feet, then back at the girl.

Alby's forehead creased. "You're sure?" He looked like he didn't believe a word Thomas said, seemed almost angry.

What could he possibly think I have to do with this, Thomas thought. He met Alby's gaze evenly and answered the only way he knew how. "Yes. Why?"

"Shut it," Alby muttered, looking back down at the girl.

"Can't be a coincidence. Two days, two Greedies, one alive, one dead."

Then Alby's words started to make sense and panic flared in Thomas. "You don't think I—" He couldn't even finish the sentence.

"Sammy, Greedy." Newt said. "We're not saying you bloody killed the girl."

Thomas's mind was spinning. He was sure he'd never seen her before—but then the slightest hint of doubt crept in on his mind. "I swear she doesn't look familiar at all," he said anyway. He'd had enough accusations.

"Are you—?"

Before Newt could finish, the girl shut up into a stinging position. As she sucked in a huge breath, her eyes snapped open and she barked, looking around at the crowd surrounding her. Abby cried out and fell backwards. Newt gasped and jumped up, stumbling away from her. Thomas didn't move; his gaze locked on the girl, frozen in fear.

Burning blue eyes darted back and forth as she took deep breaths. Her pink lips trembled as she mumbled something over and over, indecipherable. Then she spoke one sentence—her voice hollow and haunted, but clear.

"Everything is going to change."

Thomas stared in wonder as her eyes rolled up into her head and she fell back to the ground. Her right fist shot into the air as she landed, staying rigid after she grew still, pointing towards the sky. Clutched in her hand was a wadded piece of paper.

Thomas tried to swallow but his mouth was too dry. Newt ran forward and pulled her fingers apart, grabbing the paper. With shaking hands he untold it, then dropped to his knees, spreading out the note on the ground. Thomas moved up behind him to get a look.

Scrawled across the paper in thick black letters were five words:

She's the last one. Ever.

CHAPTER 9

An odd moment of complete silence hung over the Circle. It was as if a supernatural wind had swept through the place and sucked out all sound. Newt had read the message aloud for those who couldn't see the paper, but instead of erupting in confusion, the Clavers all stood dumbfounded.

Thomas would have expected shouts and questions, arguments. But no one said a word: all eyes were glued to the girl now lying there as if asleep, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. Contrary to their original conclusion, she was very much alive.

Newt stood, and Thomas hoped for an explanation, a voice of reason, a calming presence. But all he did was crumple the note in his fist, veins popping from his skin as he squeezed it, and Thomas's heart sank. He wasn't sure why, but the situation made him very uneasy.

Abby cupped his hands around his mouth. "Med. jacks!"

Thomas wondered what that word meant—he knew he'd heard it before—but then he was abruptly knocked aside. Two

order boys were pushing the way through the crowd. One was tall with a buzz cut, his nose the size of a football. The other was short and actually had grey hair already conquering the black on the sides of his head. Thomas could only hope they'd make some sense of everything.

"So what do we do with her?" the taller one asked. His voice much higher pitched than Thomas expected.

"How should I know?" Alby said. "You two sharks are the Med-jacks — figure it out."

Med-jacks. Thomas repeated in his head, a light going on. *They must be the closest thing they have to doctors.* The short one was already on the ground, kneeling beside the girl, feeling for her pulse and leaning over to listen to her heartbeat.

"Who said Clint had fired shot at her?" someone yelled from the crowd. There were several bursts of laughter. "I'm next."

How can they joke around? Thomas thought. *The girl's half dead. He felt sick inside.*

Alby's eyes narrowed. His mouth pulled into a tight grin that didn't look like it had anything to do with humor. "If anybody touches this girl," Alby said, "you're gonna spend the night sleeping with the Grievors in the Maze. Banished no questions." He paused, turning in a slow circle as if he wanted every person to see his face. "Nobody better touch her. Nobody!"

It was the first time Thomas had actually been hearing something come out of Alby's mouth.

The short guy who'd been referred to as a Med-jack — *that* the spectator had been correct — stood up from his examination. "She seems fine. Breathing okay, normal heartbeat, although it's a bit slow. Your guess is as good as mine, but I'd say she's in a coma. Let's take her to the Homestead."

His partner leff's copped over to grab her by the arms while Clint took hold of her feet. Thomas wished he could do more than watch. With every passing second, he devoted more and more that what he'd said earlier was true. She *did* seem familiar. He felt a connection to her, though it was impossible to

grasp in his mind. The idea made him nervous, and he looked around, as if someone might've heard his thoughts.

"On the count of three," left the taller Medjack, was saying, his tall frame looking ridiculous bent in half like a praying mantis. "One . . . two . . . three!"

They lifted her with a quick jerk, almost throwing her up in the air. She was obviously a lot lighter than they'd thought, and Thomas almost shouted at them to be more careful.

"Guess we'll have to see what she does," Jeff said to no one in particular. "We can feed her soapy stuff if she doesn't wake up soon."

"Just watch her closely," Newt said. "Must be something special about her or they wouldn't have sent her here."

Thomas's gut clenched. He knew that he and the girl were connected somehow. They'd come a day apart, she seemed familiar. He had a consuming urge to become a Runner despite learning so many terrible things. What did it all mean?

Abby leaned over to look in her face once more before they carried her off. "Put her next to Ben's room and keep a watch on her day and night. Nothing better happen without me knowing about it. I don't care if she talks in her sleep or takes a klunk — you come tell me."

"Yeah," Jeff muttered, then he and Cliff shuffled off to the Homestead, the girl's body bouncing as they went, and the other Craters finally started to talk about it, scattering as their noses bubbled through the air.

Thomas watched all this in mute contemplation. This strange connection he felt wasn't his alone. The not-so-veiled accusations thrown at him only a few minutes before proved that the others suspected something, too, but what? He was already completely confused, being asked for things only made him feel worse. As it read through his thoughts, Abby walked over and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"You ain't never seen her before?" he asked.

Thomas hesitated before he answered. "Not . . . no, not that

"I remember." He hoped his shaky voice didn't betray his doubts. What if he *did* know her somehow? What would that mean?

"You're sure?" Newt produced, standing right behind Abby.

"I...no. I don't think so. Why are you glaring me like this?" As Thomas waited right then was for night to fall, so he could be alone, go to sleep.

Abby shook his head, then turned back to Newt, releasing his grip on Thomas's shoulder. "Something's whacked. Call a Gathering."

He said it quietly enough that Thomas didn't think anyone else heard, but it sounded ominous. Then the leader and Newt walked off, and Thomas was relieved to see Chuck coming his way.

"Chuck, what's a Gathering?"

He looked proud to know the answer. "It's when the Keepers meet...they only call one when something weird or terrible happens."

"Well, I guess today fits both of those categories pretty well." Thomas's stomach rumbled, interrupting his thoughts. "I didn't finish my breakfast...can we get something somewhere? I'm starving."

Chuck looked up at him, his eyebrows raised. "Seeing that chick wig, but made you hungry? You must be more psycho than I thought."

Thomas sighed. "Just get me some food."

The kitchen was small but had everything one needed to make a hearty meal. A big oven, a microwave, a dishwasher, a couple of tables. It seemed old and run-down but clean. Seeing the appliances and the familiar layout made Thomas feel as if memories—real, solid memories—were right on the edge of his mind. But again, the essential parts were missing: names, faces, places, events. It was frustrating.

"Take a seat." Chuck said. "I'll get you something, but I

swear this is the last time. Just be glad Frypan isn't around. He hates it when we raid his fridge."

Thomas was relieved they were alone. As Chuck tinkered about with dishes and things from the fridge, Thomas pulled out a wooden chair from a small plastic table and sat down. "This is crazy. How can this be for real? Somebody sent us here. Somebody evil."

Chuck paused. "Quit complaining. Just accept it and don't think about it."

"Yeah, right." Thomas looked out a window. This seemed a good time to bring up one of the million questions bouncing through his brain. "So where does the electricity come from?"

"Who cares? I'd take it."

What a surprise. Thomas thought. No answer.

Chuck brought two plates with sandwiches and carrots over to the table. The bread was thick and white, the carrots a sparkling, bright orange. Thomas's stomach begged him to hurry; he picked up his sandwich and started devouring it.

"Oh, man," he mumbled with a full mouth. "At least the food is good."

Thomas was able to eat the rest of his meal without another word from Chuck. And he was lucky that the kid didn't feel like talking, because despite the complete weirdness of everything that had happened within Thomas's known reach of memory, he felt calm again. His stomach full, his energy replenished, his mind thankful for a few moments of silence, he decided that from then on he'd just wing and deal with things.

After his last bite, Thomas sat back in his chair. "So, Chuck," he said as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. "What do I have to do to become a Keeper?"

"Not that again." Chuck looked up from his plate, where he'd been picking at the crumbs. He let out a low, gurgly burp that made Thomas cringe.

Alby said I'd start my trials soon with the different Keepers

So, when do I get a shot with the Runners?" Thomas waited patiently to get some sort of actual information from Chuck.

Chuck rolled his eyes dramatically, leaving no doubt as to how stupid an idea he thought that would be. "They should be back in a few hours. Why don't you ask *them*?"

Thomas ignored the sarcasm, digging deeper. "What do they do when they get back every night? What's up with the concrete building?"

"Maps. They meet as soon as they get back, before they forget anything."

Maps? Thomas was confused. "But if they're trying to make a map, don't they have paper to write on while they're out there?" Maps. This intrigued him more than anything else he'd heard in a while. It was the first thing suggesting a potential solution to the trapped dilemma.

"Of course they do, but there's still stuff they need to talk about and discuss and analyze and all that kung fu stuff," the boy rolled his eyes. "They spend most of their time talking to each other while writing. That's why they're called *Runners*."

Thomas thought about the Runners and the maps. Could he make ready, be so massively huge that even after two years he'd still hadn't found a way out? It seemed impossible. But then he remembered what Abby said about the moving walls. What if all of them were sentenced to live here until they died?

Sentenced. The word made him feel a rush of panic, and the spark of hope the meal had brought him fizzled with a silent hiss.

"Chuck, what if we're all criminals? I mean... what if we're murderers or something?"

"Huh?" Chuck looked up at him as if he were a crazy person. "Where did that happy thought come from?"

"Think about it. Our memories are wiped. We live inside a place that seems to have no way out, surrounded by hoodlumpy, thirsty monster guards. Doesn't that sound like a prison to

you?" As he said it out loud, it sounded more and more possible. Nausea trickled into his chest.

"I'm probably twelve years old, dude." Chuck pointed to his chest. "At the most, thirteen. You really think I did something that would send me to prison for the rest of my life?"

"I don't care what you did or didn't do. Either way, you *might* have been sent to a prison. Does this seem like a holiday to you?" *Oh man*, Thomas thought. *Please let me be wrong.*

Chuck thought for a moment. "I don't know. It's better than—"

"Yeah, I know, living in a piece of junk." Thomas stood up and pushed his chair back under the table. He asked Chuck, but trying to have an intelligent conversation with him was impossible. Not to mention frustrating and irritating. "Go and make yourself another sandwich. I'm going exploring. See ya tonight."

He stepped out of the kitchen and into the courtyard where Chuck could offer to join him. The Claude had gone back to business as usual—people working the jobs, the doors of the Box closed, sun shining down. Any signs of a crazed girl bearing notes of doom had disappeared.

Having had his tour cut short, he decided to take a walk around the Claude on his own and get a better look and feel for the place. He headed out for the northeast corner, towards the big rows of tall green cornstalks that looked ready to harvest. There was other stuff, too: tomatoes, lettuce, peas, a lot more that Thomas didn't recognise.

He took a deep breath, loving the fresh whiff of dirt and growing plants. He was almost positive the smell would bring back some sort of pleasant memory, but nothing came. As he got closer, he saw that several boys were weeding and picking in the small fields. One waved at him with a smile. An actual smile.

Maybe this place won't be so bad after all, Thomas thought. *Not everyone here can be a jerk.* He took another deep breath, if

the pleasant air and pulled himself out of his thoughts. There was a lot more he wanted to see.

Next was the southeast corner where shabbily built wooden fences held in several cows, goats, sheep, and pigs. No horses, though. *Those mules*, Thomas thought. *Roaders* would definitely be faster than *Runners*. As he approached, he figured he must've dealt with animals in his life before the Glade. Their smothering sound – they seemed very tame – sat on him.

The smother wasn't quite as nice as the crops, but still, he imagined it could've been a lot worse. As he explored the area, he realised more and more how well the Gladers kept to the place, how clean it was. He was impressed by how organised they must be, how hard they all must work. He could only imagine how truly horrific a place this could be if everyone went lazy and stupid.

Finally, he made it to the southwest quarter, near the forest.

He was approaching the sparse, skeletal trees in front of the denser woods when he was startled by a blur of movement at his feet, followed by a hurried set of clacking sounds. He looked down just in time to see the slip flash off something metallic – a toy rat – scurrying past him and towards the small forest. The thing was already three metres away by the time he realised it wasn't a rat at all – it was more like a lizard, with at least six legs scuttling the long, silver torso along.

A beetle blade. *Is that one worth it?* A boy had said.

He caught a gleam of red light sweeping the ground in front of the area, as if it came from his eyes. Logic told him it had to be his mind playing tricks on him, but he could have sworn he saw the word *WZ*, *ALL*, scrawled down its mother back in large green letters. Something so strange had to be investigated.

Thomas sprinted after the scurrying spy, and in a matter of seconds he entered the thick canopy of trees and the world became dark.

CHAPTER 10

He couldn't believe how quickly the light disappeared. From the Gade proper the forest didn't look that big, maybe a couple of acres. Yet the trees were tall, with sturdy trunks, packed tightly together, the canopy up above thick with leaves. The air around him had a greenish, muted hue, as if on y several minutes of twilight remained in the day.

It was somehow beautiful and creepy, all at once.

Moving as fast as he could, Thomas crashed through the heavy foliage, thin branches slapping at his face. He ducked to avoid a low hanging limb, almost falling. Reaching out, he caught hold of a branch and swung himself forward to regain his balance. A thick bed of leaves and fallen twigs crunched underneath him.

All the while, his eyes stayed riveted on the beetle blade snatching across the forest floor. Deeper it went, its red light glowing brighter as the surroundings darkened.

Thomas had charged ten or twelve metres into the woods, dodging and ducking and losing ground with every second.

when he saw the blade clamped onto a particularly large tree and scooped up its trunk. But by the time Thomas reached the tree, any sign of the creature had vanished. It had disappeared deep within the foliage - almost as if it had never existed.

He'd lost the sucker.

"Shuck it," Thomas whispered, almost aloud. Almost. As strange as it seemed, the word felt natural on his lips. He had already morphed into a Glader.

A twig snapped somewhere to his right and he jerked his head in that direction. He stifled his breath in shock.

Another snap, this time louder, almost like someone had broken a stick over their knee.

"What's there?" Thomas yelled out a tingle of fear shooting across his shoulders. His voice bounced off the canopy of leaves above him, echoing through the air. He stayed frozen, rooted to the spot as all grew silent, except for the whispering song of a few birds in the distance. But no one answered his call. Nor did he hear any more sounds from that direction.

Without really thinking it through, Thomas headed toward the noise he'd heard. Not bothering to hide his progress, he pushed aside branches as he walked, jerking them whip back to position when he passed. He squinted, willed his eyes to work in the growing darkness, wishing he had a torch. He thought about torches and his memory. Once again, he remembered a tangible thing from his past, but could it assign it to any specific time or place, or even associate it with any exact person or event. Frustrating.

"Anybody there?" he asked again, feeling a little calmer since the noise hadn't repeated. It was probably just an animal, maybe another beetle blade, just in case, he called out, "Is me, Thomas. The new guy. Well, second-newest guy."

He winced and shook his head, hoping now that someone was there. He sounded like a complete idiot.

Again, no reply.

He stepped around a large rock and peered up short. An eye

shiver ran down his back. He'd reached the graveyard.

The clearing was small, maybe ten square metres, and covered with a thick layer of leafy weeds growing close to the ground. Thomas could see several clumps of prepared wooden crosses poking through this growth, the horizontal pieces lashed to the upright ones with a spiky vine twine. The grave markers had been painted white, but by someone in an obvious hurry - grubby globs covered them and bare streaks of wood showed through. Names had been carved in on the wood.

Thomas stepped up, hesitantly, to the closest one and knelt down to get a look. The light was so dark now that he almost felt as if he were looking through black mist. Even the forest had quieted, as though they'd gone to bed for the night, and the sound of insects was barely noticeable - or at least much less than normal. For the first time, Thomas realised how humid it was in the woods - the damp air already beading sweat on his forehead, the ticks on his hands.

He leaned closer to the first cross. It looked fresh and bore the name Stephen - the *St* extra small and right at the edge because the carver hadn't estimated well how much room he'd need.

Stephen. Thomas thought, feeling an unexpected but detached sorrow. *What a poor story! ("Back with you to death")*

He stood and walked over to another cross, this one almost completely overgrown with weeds, the ground firm at its base. Whoever it was, he must've been here the first time, because his grave looked the oldest. The name was George.

Thomas looked around and saw there were a dozen or so other graves. A couple of them appeared to be just as fresh as the first one he'd examined. A silver glint caught his attention. It was a tattered, torn, the scuffling beetle that had led him to the forest - but just as odd. He moved through the markers until he got to a grave covered with a sheet of grimy plastic or glass, its edges stained with filth. He squinted, trying to make out what was on the other side, then gasped when it came into focus.

was a window into another grave—one that had the dusty remnants of a rotting body.

Completely creeped out, Thomas leaned closer to get a better look anyway, curious. The tomb was smaller than usual,

only the top *half* of the deceased person lay inside. He remembered Chicks's story about the boy who'd tried to abscond down the dark hole of the Box after it had descended, only to be cut in two by something slicing through the air. Words were etched on the glass. Thomas could barely read them.

*Let this husk speak for a warning to all
You can't escape through the Box Hole*

Thomas felt the odd urge to snigger—it seemed too ridiculous to be true. But he was also disgusted with himself for being so shallow and glib. Shaking his head, he had stepped aside to read more names of the dead when another twig broke, this time straight in front of him, right behind the trees on the other side of the graveyard.

Then another snap. Then another. Coming closer. And the darkness was thick.

"What's out there?" he called, his voice shaky and hollow. It sounded as if he were speaking inside an insulated tunnel. "Seriously, this is stupid." He hated to admit to himself just how terrified he was.

Instead of answering, the person gave up all pretence of stealth and started running, crashing through the forest undergrowth and the clearing of the graveyard, circling towards the spot where Thomas stood. He took panic overtaking him. Now, within a metre or so away, the vision grew darker and louder until Thomas caught a shadowed glimpse of a skinny boy, limping along in a strange, lurching run.

"Who the hell—?"

The boy burst through the trees before Thomas could finish. He saw only a flash of pale skin and enormous eyes—the

haunted image of an apparition—and cried out, tried to run, but it was too late. The figure leaped onto the air and was on top of him, slamming into his shoulders, gripping him with strong hands. Thomas crashed to the ground: he felt a grave marker dig into his back before it snapped in two, burning a deep scratch along his flesh.

He pushed and swatted at his attacker, a relentless tumble of skin and bones cavorting on top of him as he tried to gain purchase. It seemed like a monster, a horror from a nightmare, but Thomas knew it had to be a Glader, someone who'd completely lost his mind. He heard teeth snapping open and closed, a horrific *cuck-cuck-cuck*. Then he felt the jarring dagger of pain as the boy's mouth found a home, but deep, y into Thomas's shoulder.

Thomas screamed, the pain like a burst of adrenaline through his blood. He planted the palms of his hands against his attacker's chest and pushed, straightening his arms until his muscles strained against the struggling figure above him. Finally the kid fell back, a sharp crack filled the air as another grave marker met its demise.

Thomas squirmed away on his hands and feet, sucking in breaths of air, and got his first good look at the crazed attacker.
It was the sick boy.

It was Ben.

CHAPTER 11

It looked as if Ben had recovered only slightly since Thomas had seen him in the Homestead. He wore nothing but shorts, his whiter-than-white skin stretched across his bones like a sheet wrapped tightly around a bundle of sticks. Rope-like veins ran along his body, pulsing and green, his eyes pronounced than the day before. His bloodshot eyes fell upon Thomas as if he were seeing his next meal.

Ben crouched, ready to spring for another attack. At some point a knife had made an appearance, gripped in his right hand. Thomas was filled with a queasy fear, dreading that this was happening at all.

"Ben!"

Thomas looked towards the voice, surprised to see Abby standing at the edge of the graveyard, a mere phantom in the fading light. Robert flooded Thomass body. Abby held a large bow, an arrow cocked for the kill, pointed straight at Ben.

"Ben! Abby repeated. "Stop right now, or you ain't gonna see tomorrow."

Thomas looked back at Ben, who stared viciously at Abby, his tongue darting between his lips to wet them. *What could possibly be wrong with that kid?* Thomas thought. The boy had turned into a monster. Why?

"If you kill me," Ben shrieked, spit flying from his mouth far enough to hit Thomas in the face "you'll get the wrong guy." He snapped his gaze back to Thomas. "He's the shank you wanna kill." His voice was full of madness.

"Don't be stupid, Ben." Abby said, his voice calm as he continued to aim the arrow. "Thomas has only just got here, there's nothing to worry about. You're still bugged from the Changing. You should've never left your bed."

"He's not one of us," Ben shouted. "I saw him, he's bad, he's bad. We have to kill him." Let me gut him.

Thomas took an involuntary step backwards, horrified by what Ben had said. What did he mean, he'd seen him? Why did he think Thomas was bad?

Abby tacitly moved his weapon a centimetre, still aiming for Ben. "You leave that to me and the keepers. You get out, shuck face." His hands were perfectly steady as he held the bow, as if he had propped it against a branch for support. "Right now, back your scrawny butt down and get to the Homestead."

"He'll wanna take us home," Ben said. "He'll wanna get us out of the Maze. Better we all turned off the lights. Better we tore each others guts out!"

"What are you taking-?" Thomas began.

"Shut your face!" Ben screamed. "Shut your ugly, traitorous face!"

"Ben," Abby said calmly. "I'm gonna count to three."

"He's bad, he's bad, he's bad..." Ben was whispering now, almost chanting. He swayed back and forth, switching the knife from hand to hand, eyes glued on Thomas.

"One."

"Bad, bad, bad, bad, bad..." Ben smiled, his teeth seemed

to glow, greenish in the pale light

Thomas wanted to look away, get out of there. But he couldn't move; he was too mesmerised, too scared.

"Two." Alby's voice was louder, filled with warning.

"Ben." Thomas said, trying to make sense of it all. "I'm not... I don't even know what—"

Ben screamed, a strangled gurgle of madness, and zapped into the air, slashing out with his blade.

"Three!" Alby shouted.

There was the sound of snapping wire. The *whosh* of an object slicing through the air. The sickening, wet *thunk* of it finding a home.

Ben's head snapped violently to the left, twisting his body until he landed on his stomach, his feet pointed towards Thomas. He made no sound.

Thomas jumped to his feet and stumbled forward. The long shaft of the arrow stuck from Ben's cheek, the blood surprisingly less than Thomas had expected, but seeping out all the same. Black in the darkness, like oil. The only movement was Ben's right little finger, twitching. Thomas fought the urge to puke. Was Ben dead because he'd seen it? Was it his fault?

"Come on," Alby said. "Baggers. I take care of him tomorrow."

What just happened here? Thomas thought, the world tilting around him as he stared at the lifeless body. *What did I ever do to this kid?*

He woke up, wanting answers, but Alby was already gone, a creaking branch the only sign he'd ever stood there in the first place.

Thomas squeezed his eyes against the blinding glow of the sun as he emerged from the woods. He was limping, his ankle screaming in pain, though he had no memory of hurting. He held one hand carefully over the area where he'd been bitten, the other clutched his stomach as if that would prevent what. There was now, at least, an invisible bar. The image of Ben's

head popped into his mind, cocked at an unnatural angle, blood running down the shaft of the arrow until it collected, dripped, splattered on the ground.

The image of it was the last straw.

He fell to his knees by one of the scraggy trees on the outskirts of the forest and threw up, retching as he coughed and spat out every last morsel of the acidic, nasty bile from his stomach. His whole body shook and it seemed like the vomiting would never end.

And then, as if his brain were mocking him, trying to make it worse, he had a thought.

He'd now been at the Grave for roughly twenty-four hours. One full day. That was it. And look at all the things that had happened. All the terrible things.

Surely it could only get better.

That night, Thomas lay staring at the sparkling sky, wondering if he'd ever sleep again. Every time he closed his eyes, the monstrous image of Ben leaping at him, the boy's face searing, unforgotten, filled his mind. Eyes open or not, he could swear he kept hearing the most *think* of the arrow slamming into Ben's cheek.

Thomas knew he'd never forget these few terrible minutes in the graveyard.

"Say something," Chuck said for the fifth time since they'd set out their sleeping bags.

"No," Thomas replied, just as he had before.

"Everyone knows what happened. It's happened once or twice—some Greaver-stung snailk flipped out and attacked somebody. Don't think you're special."

For the first time, Thomas thought Chuck's personality had gone from mildly irritating to invulnerable. "Chuck, be glad I'm not holding Abyss bow right now."

"I'm just play—"

"Shut up, Chuck. Go to sleep." Thomas just couldn't handle it right then.

Eventually his "buddy" did doze off and based on the rumble of snores across the clade so did everyone else. Hours later deep in the night Thomas was still the only one awake. He wanted to cry but didn't. He wanted to find Alby and punch him for no reason whatsoever but didn't. He wanted to scream and kick and spit and open up the Box and jump into the blackness below. But he didn't.

He closed his eyes and forced the thoughts and dark images away and at some point he fell asleep.

Chuck had to drag Thomas out of his sleeping bag in the morning, drag him to the showers and drag him to the dressing room, the whole time Thomas felt money and indifference. His head aching, his body wanting more sleep. Breakfast was a blur and an hour after it was over Thomas couldn't remember what he'd eaten. He was so tired his brain felt like someone had gone in and stapled it to his skull in a dozen places. Hearsturn ravaged his chest.

But from what he could tell naps were frowned upon in the grant working farm of the clade.

He stood with Newt in front of the barn of the Blood House getting ready for his last training session with a keeper. Every time the night came, he was actually excited to learn more and for the chance to get his mind off Ben and the graveyard. Cows moored, sheep bleated, pigs squealed all around him. Somewhere close by a dog barked making Thomas hope Trapan didn't bring new meaning to the word *hot dog*. *Hot dog* he thought. *When the last time I had a hot dog? Who did I eat it with?*

"Tommy are you even listening to me?"

Thomas snapped out of his daze and focused on Newt, who'd been talking for who knew how long. Thomas hadn't heard a word of it. "Yeah sorry. Couldn't sleep last night."

Newt attempted a pathetic smile. "Can't blame ya there. Went through the bugger whinger you did. Probably think in

a slanthead shank for getting you ready to work your butt off today after an episode like that."

Thomas shrugged. "Works probably the best thing I could do. Anything to get my mind off it."

Newt nodded, and his smile became more genuine. "You're as smart as you work, Tommy. That's one of the reasons we run this place as nice and busy like. You get lazy, you get sad. Start givin' up. Plain and simple."

Thomas nodded, absently kicking a loose rock across the dusty, cracked stone floor of the Cade. "So what's the latest on that girl from yesterday? If anything had penetrated the haze of this long morning, it had been thoughts of her. He wanted to know more about her, understand the odd connection he felt to her.

"Still in a coma, sleeping. Med-jacks are spoon feeding her whatever soups Frypan can cook and checking her vitals and such. She seems okay—just dead to the world for now."

"That was just plain weird." If it hadn't been for the whole Ben-in-the-graveyard incident, Thomas was sure she would've been all he'd thought about last night. Maybe he wouldn't have been able to sleep for an entirely different reason. He wanted to know who she was and if he really did know her somehow.

"Yeah," Newt said. "Weird's as good a word as any, I spect."

Thomas looked over Newt's shoulder at the dog-tailed red barn, pushing thoughts of the girl aside. "So what's first? Milk cows or slaughter some poor little pigs?"

Newt laughed a sound Thomas realised he hadn't heard much since he'd arrived. "We always make the Newbies start with the bloody Suckers. Don't worry, Captain Frypan's vitals ain't but a part. Suckers do anything and everything dealin' with the beasnes."

"Too bad I can't remember my whole life. Maybe I love killing animals." He was just joking, but Newt didn't seem to get it.

Newt nodded towards the barn. "Oh, you'd know good and

wed by the time sun sets tonight. Let's go and meet Winston - he's the Keeper."

Winston was an acne-covered kid, short but muscular, and it seemed to Thomas that the Keeper liked him in way too much. *Maybe he was sent here for being a serial killer*, he thought.

Winston showed Thomas around for the first hour pointing out which pens held which animals, where the chicken and turkey coops were, what went where in the barn. The dog, a pesky black Lab named Bark, took quick way to Thomas, hanging at his feet the entire tour. Wondering where the dog came from, Thomas asked Winston, who said Bark had just always been there. Lucky, he seemed to have got his name as a joke because he was pretty quiet.

The second hour was spent actually working with the farm animals - feeding, cleaning, fixing a fence, scraping up manure. *At last!* Thomas found himself using the older terms more and more.

The third hour was the hardest for Thomas. He had to watch as Winston slaughtered a hog and began preparing its many parts for butchering. Thomas swore two things to himself as he walked away for lunch break: first, his career would not be with the animals, second, he'd never again eat something that came out of a pig.

Winston had said for him to go on alone that he'd hang around the Blood House, which was fine with Thomas. As he walked towards the East Door, he couldn't stop picturing Winston in a dark corner of the barn gnawing on raw pig's feet. The guy gave him the willies.

Thomas was just passing the Box when he was surprised to see someone enter the Glade from the Maze through the West Door to his left - an Asian kid with strong arms and short black hair who looked a little older than Thomas. The Runner stopped three steps in, then bent over and put his hands on his knees, gasping for breath. He looked like he'd just run twenty

males face red, skin covered in sweat, clothes soaked.

Thomas stared, overcome with curiosity. He'd yet to see a Runner up close or talk to one. Plus, based on the last couple of days, the Runner was home hours early. Thomas stepped forward, eager to meet him and ask questions.

But before he could form a sentence, the boy collapsed to the ground.

CHAPTER 12

Thomas didn't move for a few seconds. The boy lay in a crumpled heap, barely moving, but Thomas was frozen by indecision, afraid to get involved. What if something was serious & wrong with this guy? What if he'd been hurt? What if—

Thomas snapped out of it. The Runner obviously needed help.

"A hy!" he shouted. "Newt! Somebody get them!"

Thomas sprinted to the older boy and knelt down beside him. "Hey! You okay?" The Runner's head rested on outstretched arms as he panted, his chest heaving. He was conscious, but Thomas had never seen someone so exhausted.

"I'm... fine," he said between breaths, then looked up. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm new here," said Thomas, but that the Runners were out in the Maze during the day and hadn't witnessed any of the recent events firsthand. Did this guy even know about the game? Probably—surely someone had told him. And Thomas—been

here just a couple of days."

The Runner pushed himself up into a sitting position, his black hair matted to his skull with sweat. "Oh yeah Thomas," he trailed. "Newbie. You and the chick."

Alby jiggled up then, clearly upset. "What're you doing back Minho? What happened?"

"Calm your wad, Alby," the Runner replied, seeming to gain strength by the second. "Make yourself useful and get me some water - I dropped my pack out there somewhere."

But Alby didn't move. He kicked Minho in the leg, too hard to be playful. "What happened?"

"I can barely talk, shack-face!" Minho yelled, his voice raw. "Get me some water!"

Alby looked over at Thomas, who was shocked to see the slightest hint of a smile flash across his face before vanishing in a snarl. "Minho's the only shank who can talk to me like that without getting his butt kicked off the Cliff."

Then, surprising Thomas even more, Alby turned and ran off, presumably to get Minho some water.

Thomas turned towards Minho. "He lets you boss him around?"

Minho shrugged, then wiped fresh beads of sweat off his forehead. "You scared of that p-p-squeak? Dude, you got a lot to learn. Freakin' Newbies."

The rebuke hurt Thomas far more than it should have, considering he'd known this guy all of three minutes. "Isn't he the leader?"

"Leader?" Minho barked a grunt that was probably supposed to be a laugh. "Yeah, call him leader all you want. Maybe we should call him E. Presidente. Nah nah. Assara Alby. There you go." He rubbed his eyes, sniggering as he did so.

Thomas didn't know what to make of the conversation - it was hard to tell when Minho was joking. "So who is the leader if he isn't?"

"Greenie, just shut it before you confuse yourself more."

Minho sighed as if bored, then muttered, almost to himself, "Why do you snarks always come in here asking stupid questions? It's really annoying."

"What do you expect us to do?" Thomas felt a flush of anger. *Like you were any different when you first came*, he wanted to say.

"Do what you're told, keep your mouth shut. That's what I expect."

Minho had looked him square in the face for the first time with that last sentence, and Thomas scooted back several centimetres before he could stop himself. He realised immediately he'd just made a mistake. He couldn't let his guy think he could talk to him like that.

He pushed himself back up onto his knees so he was looking down at the other boy. "Yeah, I'm sure that's exactly what you did as a Newbie."

Minho looked at Thomas carefully. Then, again staring straight in his eyes, said "I was one of the first Gladers, alright. Shut your hole till you know what you're talking about."

Thomas, now slightly scared of the guy but mostly fed up with his attitude, moved to get up. Minho's hand snapped out and grabbed his arm.

"Dude, sit down. I'm just playing with your head. It's too much for you. You'll see when the next Newbie..." He trailed off, a perplexed look wrinkling his eyebrows. "Guess there won't be another Newbie, huh?"

Thomas relaxed, returned to a sitting position, surprised at how easily he'd been put back at ease. He thought of the girl and the note saying she was the last one ever. "Guess not."

Minho squinted slightly as if he was studying Thomas. "You saw the chick, right? Everybody says you probably know her or something."

Thomas felt himself grow defensive. "I saw her. Doesn't really look familiar at all." He felt immediately guilty for lying – even if it was just a little lie.

"She hot?"

Thomas paused, not having thought of her in that way since she freaked out and delivered the note and her one-liner *Everything is going to change*. But he remembered how beautiful she was. "Yeah. I guess she's hot."

Minho leaned back until he lay flat, eyes closed. "Yeah, you guess. If you got a thing for chicks in comas, right?" He sniggered again.

"Right." Thomas was having the hardest time figuring out if he liked Minho or not—his personality seemed to change every minute. After a long pause, Thomas decided to take a chance. "So..." he asked cautiously, "did you find anything today?"

Minho's eyes opened wide; he focused on Thomas. "You know what, Greenie? That's usually the dumbest shack-faced thing you could ask a Runner." He closed his eyes again. "But not today."

"What do you mean?" Thomas dared to hope for information. *An answer*, he thought. *Please just give me an answer!*

"Just wait 'til the fancy admiral gets back. I don't like saying stuff twice. Plus, he might not want you to hear it anyway."

Thomas sighed. He wasn't the least bit surprised at the non-answer. "Well, at least tell me why you look so tired. Don't you run out there every day?"

Minho groaned as he pulled himself up and crossed his legs under him. "Yeah, Greenie. I run out there every day. Let's just say I got a little excited and ran extra fast to get my booty back here."

"Why?" Thomas desperately wanted to hear about what happened out in the Maze.

Minho threw his hands up. "Dude, I told you: Patience. Wait for General Aiby."

Something in his voice lessened; he blew out. Thomas made his decision. He liked Minho. "Okay. I'll shut up. Just make sure Aiby lets me hear the news, too."

Minho studied him for a second. "Okay Green c. You da boss."

Abby woke up a minute later with a big plastic cup full of water and handed it to Minho, who gulped down the whole thing without stopping once for breath.

"Okay," Abby said, "out with it. What happened?" Minho raised his eyebrows and nodded towards Thomas. "He's fine." Abby replied, "I don't care what this shank hears. Just talk."

Thomas sat quietly in anticipation as Minho struggled to stand up, wincing with every move, his whole demeanour one of *creaking* exhaustion. The Kanner balanced himself against the wall, gave both of them a cold look. "Found a dead one."

"Huh?" Abby asked. "A dead what?"

Minho smiled. "A dead Creeper."

CHAPTER 13

Thomas was fascinated at the mention of a Griever. The nasty creature was terrifying to think about, but he wondered why finding a dead one was such a big deal. Had it never happened before?

Alby looked like someone had just told him he could grow wings and fly. "A bit of a good time for jokes," he said.

"Look," Minho answered. "I wouldn't believe me if I were you, either. But trust me, I did. Big fat, nasty one."

It's definitely never happened before. The max thought.

"You found a *dead* Griever," Alby repeated.

Yet Alby," Minho said, his words laced with annoyance. "A couple of miles from here, out near the Cliff."

Alby looked out at the Maze, then back at Minho. "Well, why didn't you bring it back with you?"

Minho laughed again, a half-grunt, half-giggle. "You been dronken Frypan's saucy-sauce? Those things must weigh half a ton, dude. Plus, I wouldn't touch one if you gave me a free trip out of this place."

Alby persisted with the questions. "What did it look like? Were the metal spikes in or out of its body? Did it move at all – was its skin still moist?"

Thomas was bursting with questions – *Metal spikes? Moist skin? What in the world?* – but held his tongue, not wanting to remind them he was there. And that maybe they should talk in private.

"S'm'f' mar," Minho said. "You gotta see it for yourself. It's... weird."

"Weird?" Alby looked confused.

"Dude, I'm exhausted, starving and sun-sick. But if you wanna haul it right now, we could probably make it there and back before the walls shut."

Alby looked at his watch. "Better wait 'til the wake-up tomorrow."

"Smartest thing you've said in a week," Minho righted himself from leaning on the wall, hit Alby on the arm, then started walking towards the Homesread with a slight limp. He spoke over his shoulder as he shuttled away. "It looked like his whole body was in pain. I should go back out there, but screw it. I'm gonna go and eat some of Frapans nasty casserole."

Thomas felt a wash of disappointment. He had to admit Minho did look like he deserved a rest and a place to eat, but he wanted to learn more.

Then Alby turned to Thomas, surprising him. "If you know something and aren't telling me..."

Thomas was sick of being accused of knowing things. Wasn't that the problem in the first place? He *didn't* know anything. He looked at the boy square in the face and asked, simply, "Why do you hate me so much?"

The look that came over Alby's face was indescribable – part confusion, part anger, part shock. "Hate you? Boy, you ain't earned nothing since showing up in that Box. This ain't got nothing to do with no hate or like or love or friends or anything. All we care about is surviving. Drop your sassy side and start

using that shuck brain if you got one."

Thomas felt like he'd been slapped. "But why do you keep accusing—?"

"Cuz it can't be a coincidence, sonthead! You pop'n here, then we get a girl Newbie the next ~~day~~ a crazy note, Ben try'n to bite ya dead Cravers. Someth'ng's go'n on and I am a rest'n ol' I figure it out."

"I don't *know* anythin', Abby." It felt good to put some heat into his words. "I don't even know where I ~~was~~ three days ago, much less why this Minho guy would find a dead thing called a Griever. So back off!"

Abby leaned back slightly, stared absently at Thomas for several seconds. Then he said, "Simon, Greenie. Grow up and start thinkin'. Ain't got nothin' to do with accusin' nobody of nothin'. But if you remember anythin', I someth'ng even *seems* familiar, you better start talkin'. Prom, se me."

Not until I have a solid memory. Thomas thought. *Not unless I want to stare.* "Yeah, I guess, but—"

"Just promise!"

Thomas paused, sick of Abby and his attitude. "Whatever," he finally said. "I promise."

At that Abby turned and walked away, not sayin' another word.

Thomas found a tree in the Dead Heads, one of the bigger ones on the edge of the forest with plenty of shade. He crested gettin' back to work with Wins on the Butcher and knew he needed to eat some lunch, but he didn't want to be near anybody for as long as he could get away with it. Leanin' back against the thick trunk, he wished for a breeze but didn't get one.

He'd just felt his eyelids droop when Chuck turned his peace and quiet.

"Thomas, Thomas," the boy shrieked as he ran towards him, pumping his arms, his face lit up with excitement.

Thomas rubbed his eyes and groaned. He wanted nothing in the world more than a hard nap. I wasn't sure Chuck stopped right in front of him, pausing to catch his breath, as he finally looked up. "What?"

Words slowly fell from Chuck's mouth between his gasps for breath. "Ben... Ben... he isn't dead."

All signs of fatigue evaporated out of the mass system. He jumped up to stand nose to nose with Chuck. "A-ha."

He wasn't dead. Baggers went to get him. Arrow missed his brain. Med-jacks patched him up."

Thomas turned away to stare into the forest where the sick boy had attacked him just the night before. "You gotta be kidding. I saw him. He wasn't dead. I no more did it know what he felt most strongly, couldn't let it tear that he'd be attacked again..."

"Well, so did I," Chuck said. "He's locked up in the Hammer, a huge bandage covering his head."

Thomas spun to face Chuck again. "The Hammer? What do you mean?"

"The Hammer is our jail on the north side of the Flame-stand," Chuck pointed in that direction. "They threw him in it so fast, the Med-jacks had to patch him up in here."

Thomas rubbed his eyes. Guilt consumed him when he realised how he truly felt. He'd been relieved that Ben was dead, that he didn't have to worry about facing him again. "So what are they going to do with him?"

"A ready-made Gathering of the Keepers this morning made a unanimous decision by the sounds of it. Looks like Ben'll be wishing that arrow had found a home inside his shack brain after all."

Thomas squinted, confused by what Chuck had said. "What are you talking about?"

"He's being Banished. Tonight for trying to kill you."

"Banished? What does *that* mean?" Thomas had to ask, though he knew it couldn't be good if Chuck thought it was

worse than being dead.

And then Thomas saw perhaps the most disturbing thing he'd seen since he'd arrived at the Glade. Chuck didn't answer, he only smiled. *Smiled*, despite it all, despite the sinister sound of what he'd just announced. Then he turned and ran, maybe to tell someone else the exciting news.

That night, Newt and Abby gathered every last Glader at the East Door about half an hour before it closed, the first traces of twilight & mooness creeping across the sky. The Runners had just returned and entered the mysterious Map Room, hanging the iron door shut. Minho had already gone in earlier. Abby told the Runners to hurry about their business. He wanted them back out in twenty minutes.

At the moment Thomas knew Chuck had smiled when breaking the news about Ben being banished. Though he didn't know exactly what it meant, it certainly didn't sound like a good thing. Especially since they were all standing so close to the Maze. *Are they going to put him out there?* he wondered. *What if the Grievors?*

The other Gladers intuited their conversations in his silent tones, an intense feeling of dreadful anticipation hanging over them like a patch of thick fog. But Thomas said nothing, standing with arms folded, waiting for the show. He stood quietly until the Runners finally came out of the room, and a lot of them looked exhausted, their faces pinched from deep thinking. Minho had been the first to exit, which made Thomas wonder if he was the keeper of the Runners.

"Bring him out!" Abby shouted, startling Thomas out of his thoughts.

His arms fell to his sides as he turned, looking around the Glade for a sign of Ben. He didn't find a hand up with a boy as he wondered what the boy would do when he saw him.

From around the far side of the Homestead, three of the bigger boys appeared, a crate dragging Ben along, the groaning

His clothes were tattered, barely hanging on, a bloody, thick bandage covered half his head and face. Refusing to put his feet down or help the progress in any way, he seemed as dead as the last time Thomas had seen him. Except for one thing.

His eyes were open, and they were wide with terror.

"Newt," Aby said in a much quieter voice. Thomas wouldn't have heard him if he hadn't been standing just a metre or so away. "Bring out the Pole."

Newt nodded, already on the move towards a small, rashed shed used for the Gardens. He'd clearly been waiting for the order.

Thomas turned his focus back to Ben and the guards. The pale, miserable boy still made no effort to resist, letting them drag him across the dusty stone of the courtyard. When they reached the crowd, they pulled Ben to his feet in front of Aby, their leader, where Ben hung his head, refusing to make eye contact with anyone.

"You brought this on yourself, Ben," Aby said. Then he shook his head and looked towards the shack to which Newt had gone.

Thomas followed his gaze, just in time to see Newt walk through the slanted door. He was holding several aluminium poles, connecting the ends to make a shaft, maybe six metres long. When he was finished, he grabbed something odd-shaped on one of the ends and dragged the whole thing along towards the group. A shiver ran up Thomas's spine at the metallic scrape of the pole on the stone ground as Newt walked.

Thomas was horrified by the whole affair. He couldn't help feeling responsible, even though he'd never done anything to provoke Ben. How was any of it his fault? No answer came to him, but he felt the guilt as the same. Like a disease in his blood.

Finally, Newt stepped up to Aby and handed over the end of the pole he was holding. Thomas could see the strange attachment now. A loop of rough leather fastened to the metal

with a massive staple. A large button snap revealed that the loop could be opened and closed, and its purpose became obvious.

It was a collar

CHAPTER 14

Thomas watched as Ashby d buttoned the collar, then wrapped it around Ben's neck. Ben finally jerked up, as if as the loop of leather snapped closed with a loud pop. Tears glistened in his eyes, droplets of emotion rolled from his nostrils. The Graders looked on, not a word from any of them.

"Please, Ashby," Ben pleaded, his shaky voice so pathetic that Thomas couldn't believe it was the same guy who'd tried to beat a shit roar off the day before. "I swear I was just sick in the head from the kidnapping. I never would've killed him. I just lost my mind for a second. Please, Ashby, please."

Every word from the kid was like a fist punching Thomas in the gut, making him feel more guilty and confused.

Ashby didn't respond to Ben; he paled on the collar to make sure it was on. Firmly snapped and soundly attached to the long pole. He walked past Ben and along the pole, picking it up off the ground as he slid it's length through his palm and fingers. When he reached the end, he gripped it tightly and turned to face the crowd. Eyes could not have wrinkled in anger.

breathing heavily to Thomas, he suddenly looked evil.

And it was an odd sight on the other side. Ben, trembling, crying, a roughly cut collar of old leather wrapped around his pale, scrawny neck, attached to a long pole that stretched from him to Alby's x merres away. The shaft of aluminum bowed in the middle, but only a little. Even from where Thomas was standing, it looked surprisingly strong.

Alby spoke in a loud, almost ceremonial voice, looking at no one and everyone at the same time. "Ben of the Builders, you've been sentenced to Banishment for the attempted murder of Thomas the Newbie. The Keepers have spoken, and their word ain't changing. And you ain't coming back. Ever." A long pause. "Keepers, take your place on the Banishment Pole."

Thomas hated that his friend Ben was being made public. He hated the responsibility he felt. Being the centre of attention again could only bring more suspicion about him. His gut transformed into anger and pain. More than anything, he just wanted Ben gone, wanted it all to be over.

One by one, boys were stepping out of the crowd and walking over to the long pole; they grabbed it with both hands, gripped it as if ready for a fight of war machine. Newt was one of them, as was Mingo, confirming Thomas's guess that he was the Keeper of the Runners. Winston the Butcher also took up a position.

Once they were all in place—ten Keepers spaced evenly apart between Alby and Ben—the air grew still and silent. The only sounds were the muffled sobs of Ben, who kept wiping at his nose and eyes. He was looking left and right, though the collar around his neck prevented him from seeing the pole and Keepers behind him.

Thomas's feelings changed again. Something was obviously wrong with Ben. Why did he deserve this fate? Couldn't something be done for him? Would Thomas spend the rest of his days feeling responsible? *Just end, he screamed in his head, just be over!*

"Please." Ben said, his voice rising in desperation. *Pleeeeee* "Somebody help me. You can't do this to me."

"Shut up." Alby roared from behind.

But Ben ignored him, pleading for help as he started to pull on the leather snaped around his neck. "Someone stop them. Help me. Please." He glanced from boy to boy, begging with his eyes. Without fail, everyone looked away. Thomas quickly stepped behind a taller boy to avoid his own confrontation with Ben. *I can't look into those eyes again*, he thought.

"If we let snakes like you get away with this stuff," Alby said, "we never would've survived this long. Keepers, get ready."

"No, no, no, no, no." Ben was saying, half under his breath. "I swear I'll do anything. I swear. I never do it again." *Pleeeeee—*

His scream was cut off by the rattling crack of the Last Door beginning to close. Sparks flew from the stone as the massive right wall slid to the left, groaning and rattling as it made its journey to close off the entrance to the Maze for the night. The ground shook beneath them, and Thomas didn't know if he could watch what he knew was going to happen next.

"Keepers, *now!*" Alby shouted.

Ben's head snapped back as he was jerked forward, the Keepers pushing the people towards the Maze outside the Grade. A straining cry erupted from Ben's throat, louder than the sounds of the closing Door. He fell to his knees, only to be jerked back to his feet by the Keeper in front of the casket guy with black hair and a scar on his face.

"*Noooooo!*" Ben screamed, spit flying from his mouth as he thrashed about, tearing at the collar with his hands. But the combined strength of the Keepers was way too much, forcing the condemned boy closer and closer to the edge of the Grade. Just as the right wall was almost there, "*Noooo!*" he screamed again, and then again.

He tried to plant his feet at the threshold, but it only lasted for a split second; he pure sent him into the Maze with a push.

Soon he was fully a metre outside the Glade, jerking his body from side to side as he tried to escape his collar. The walls of the Door were only seconds from sealing shut.

With one last violent effort Ben was finally able to twist his neck in the circle of leather so that his whole body turned to face the Gladers. Thomas could not believe he was still looking upon a human being – the madness in Ben's eyes, the phlegm flying from his mouth, the pale skin stretched taut across his veins and bones. He looked as alien as anything Thomas could imagine.

"Hold!" Alby shouted.

Ben screamed then, without pause, made a sound so piercing that Thomas covered his ears. It was a bestial, lunatic cry, surely ripping the boy's vocal cords to shreds. At the last second, the front keeper somehow loosened the larger pole from the piece attached to Ben and yanked it back into the Glade, leaving the boy to his Banishment. Ben's final screams were cut off when the walls closed with a terrible boom.

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut and was surprised to feel tears trickling down his cheeks.

CHAPTER 15

For the second night in a row, Thomas went to bed with the haunted image of Ben's face burned into his mind, tormenting him. How different would things be right now if it weren't for that one boy? Thomas could almost convince himself he'd be completely content, happy and excited to learn his new career for his good of being a runner. At last. Deep down he knew that Ben was only part of his many problems.

But now he was gone. Banished to the world of the victors, taken to wherever they took their prey, taken to whatever was done there. Though he had plenty of reasons to despise Ben, he mostly felt sorry for him.

Thomas couldn't imagine going out that way, out based on Ben's last moments, psychologically thrashing and spitting and screaming, he no longer understood the importance of the Glade rule that no one should enter the Maze except Runners, and then only during the day. Something Ben had already been strong once, which meant he knew better than perhaps anyone just exactly what lay in store for him.

That poor guy, he thought. That poor, poor guy.

Thomas shuddered and rolled over on his side. The more he thought about it, being a Runner didn't sound like such a great idea. But, unexpectedly, it still called to him.

The next morning, dawn had barely touched the sky before the working sounds of the Grade wakened Thomas from the deepest slumber since he'd arrived. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, trying to shake the heavy grogginess. Giving up, he lay back down, hoping no one would bother him.

It didn't last a minute.

Someone tapped his shoulder and he opened his eyes to see Newt staring down at him. *What now?* he thought.

"Get up, ya lug."

"Yeah, good morning to you, too. What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock, Greenie," Newt said with a mocking smile. "Figured I'd let ya sleep in after such a rough couple of days."

Thomas rolled into a sitting position, hating that he couldn't just be there for another few hours. "Sleep in? What are you guys, a bunch of farmers?" Farmers - how did he remember so much about them? Once again, his memory wove baffled him.

"I know, yeah, now that ya mention it." Newt plopped down beside Thomas and tucked his legs up under himself. He sat quietly for a few moments, looking out at all the bustle-bustle starting to whip up across the Grade. "Gonna put ya with the track hoes today, Greenie. See if that suits your fancy more than skin up bloody piggies and such."

Thomas was sick of being treated like a baby. "Aren't you supposed to quit calling me that?"

"What, bloody piggies?"

Thomas forced a laugh and shook his head. "No, *Greenie*. I'm not really the newest Newbie any more, right? The girl in the coma is. Call *her* Greenie - my name's Thomas." Thoughts of the girl crashed around his mind, made him remember the

emotion he felt. A sadness washed over him, as if he missed her, wanted to see her. *That doesn't make sense. He thought. I don't even know her name.*

Newt leaned back, eyebrows raised. "Burn me. You grew some right ice-sized eggs over night, now didn't ya."

Thomas ignored him and moved on. "Whar's a track hoe?"

"It's what we call the guys work on their harts off in the Gardens. Digging, weeding, planting and such."

Thomas nodded in that direction. "Whos the Keeper?"

"Zart. Nice guy, as long as you don't shift on the job, that is. He's the big one that stood in front last night."

Thomas didn't say anything at that, hoping that somehow he could go through the entire day without talking about Ben and the Banishment. The subject only made him sick and guilty, so he moved on to something else. "Wh why'd you come and wake me up?"

"What ya don't like see in my face first thing on the wake up?"

"Not especially so—" But before he could finish his sentence the rumble of the walls opening for the day cut him off. He looked towards the East Door almost expecting to see Ben standing there on the other side. Instead, he saw Minho stretching. Then Thomas watched as he walked over and picked something up.

It was the section of pipe with the leather collar attached to it. Minho seemed to think nothing of it, throwing it to one of the other Runners, who went and put it back in the room shed near the Gardens.

Thomas turned back to Newt, confused. How could Minho act so nonchalant about it all. "What then?"

"Only seen three Banishments, Tommy. All as nasty as the one you peeped on last night. But every buggin' time the ex-evils leave the collar on, but don't step. Leaves me the wiles ke nothin' else."

Thomas had to agree. "Whar do they *do* with people when

they catch them?" Did he really want to know?

Newt just shrugged, his indifference not very convincing. More likely he didn't want to talk about it.

"So tell me about the Runners," Thomas said suddenly. The words seemed to pop out of nowhere. But he remained still, despite an odd urge to apologise and change the subject, he wanted to know everything about them. Even after what he'd seen last night, even after witnessing the Grever through the window, he wanted to know. The *pull* to know was strong, and he didn't quite understand why. Becoming a Runner, just felt like something he was born to do.

Newt had paused, looking confused. "The Runners? Why?"

"Just wondering."

Newt gave him a suspicious look. "Best of the best, those guys. Have to be. Everything depends on them." He picked up a loose rock and tossed it, watching it absently as it bounced to a stop.

"Why aren't you one?"

Newt's gaze returned to Thomas, sharply. "Was t.l. I hurt my leg few months back. Hasn't been the bloody same since." He reached down and rubbed his right ankle absently, a brief look of pain flashing across his face. The look made Thomas think it was more from the memory, not any actual physical pain he still felt.

"How'd you do it?" Thomas asked, thinking the more he could get Newt to talk, the more he'd learn.

"Runnin' from the caggia Grevers, what else? Almost got me." He paused. "Still gives me the chills thinkin' I might have gone through the Changing."

The Changing, it was the one topic that Thomas thought might lead him to answers more than anything else. "What is that, anyway? What changes? Does everyone go psycho like Ben and start trying to kill people?"

"Ben was way worse than most. But I thought you wanted to talk about the Runners." Newt's tone warned that the

conversation about the Changing was over.

This made Thomas even more curious, though he was just fine going back to the subject of Runners. "Okay. I'm listening."

"Like I said, best of the best."

"So what do you do?" lest everybody to see how fast they are?"

Newt gave Thomas a disgusted look, then groaned. "Show me some smarts, Greenie, Tommy, whatever ya like. How fast you can bloody run is only part of it. A very small part, actually."

This piqued Thomas's interest. "What do you mean?"

"When I say best of the best, I mean at everything. To survive the buggin' Maze, you gotta be smart, quick, strong, gotta be a decision maker, know the right amount of risk to take. Can't be reckless, can't be timid, either." Newt straightened his legs and leaned back on his hands. "It's bloody awful out there, ya know? I don't miss it."

I thought the Cathevers only came out at night. "Doesn't it hurt, Thomas, did it want to run into one of those things?"

"Yeah, usually."

"Then why is it so common out there? What else didn't he know about?"

Newt sighed. "Pressure. Stress. Maze pattern changes every day, tryin' to confuse things in your mind, tryin' to get us out of here. We tryin' about the bloody Maps. Worst part, you're always scared you might not make it back. A normal maze'd be hard enough, but when it *changes* every night, couple of mortal mistakes and you're spendin' the night with vicious beasts. No room or time for dator-ees or brats."

Thomas frowned, not quite understanding the drive my dear man was trying to put. Especially after last night. But he still felt it all over.

"Why all the interest?" Newt asked.

Thomas hesitated, thinking, scared to say it out loud again.

"I want to be a Runner."

Newt turned and looked him in the eye. "Haver 's been here a week, shank. Litter early for death wishes, don't ya think?"

"I'm serious." It barely made sense even to Thomas, but he felt it deep. In fact, the desire to become a Runner was the only thing driving him on, helping him accept his predicament.

Newt didn't break his gaze. "So am I. Forget it. No one's ever become a Runner in their first month, much less their first week. Got a lot of proving to do before we'll recommend you to the Keeper."

Thomas stood and started tiding up his sleeping gear. "Newt, I mean it. I can't pull weeds all day - I go nuts. I don't have a clue what I did before they shipped me here in that metal box, but my gut tells me that being a Runner is what I'm supposed to do. I can do it."

Newt still sat there, staring up at Thomas, not offering to help. "No one said you couldn't. But give it a try, for now."

Thomas felt a surge of impatience. "But—"

"Listen, trust me on this. Tommy Start stomps around this place yapping about how you're not good to work like a peasant, how you're all nice and ready to be a Runner - you'll make plenty of enemies. Drop it for now."

Making enemies was the last thing Thomas wanted, but still he decided on another direction. "Fine. I'll ask Mpho about it."

"Could try a bigger shark. The Feathering eats Runners, and if you think I'm tough, they'd laugh in your face."

"For all you guys know, I could be really good at it. It's a waste of time to make me wait."

Newt stood to join Thomas and jabbed a finger in his face. "You listen to me, Creebie. You listen, all nice and pretty."

Thomas surprisingly didn't feel that notion dated. He rolled his eyes, but then nodded.

"You better stop this nonsense before others hear about it."

That's not how it works around here, and our whole existence depends on things *working*."

He paused, but Thomas said nothing, dreading the lecture he knew was coming.

"Order," Newt continued. "Order. You say that bloody word over and over in your stuck head. Reason: we're all sane around here 's cuz we work our butts off and maintain order. Orders the reason we live. Besides—can't very well have oodles running around tryin' to kill people, now can we? *Order*. Last thing we need is you screwin' that up."

The stubbornness washed out of Thomas. He knew it was time to shut up. "Yeah," was all he said.

Newt slapped him on the back. "Let's make a deal."

"What?" Thomas felt his hopes rise.

"You keep your mouth shut about it, and I'll put you on the list of potential trainees as soon as you show some clout. *Don't* keep your trap shut, and I'll bloody make sure you never see it happen. Deal?"

Thomas hated the idea of waiting, not knowing how long it might be. "That's a sucky deal."

Newt raised his eyebrows.

Thomas finally nodded. "Deal."

"Come on, let's get us some grub from Frypan. And hope we don't bloody choke."

That morning, Thomas finally met the infamous Frypan, if only from a distance. The guy was too busy trying to feed breakfast to an army of starving gladiators. He couldn't have been more than sixteen years old, but he had a full beard and hair sticking out all over the rest of his body as if each follicle were trying to escape the confines of his food-smeared clothes. Didn't seem like the most sanitary guy in the world to oversee all the cooking, Thomas thought. He made a mental note to watch out for nasty back hairs in his meat.

He and Newt had just joined Chuck for breakfast at a picnic

table right outside the Kitchen when a large group of Glaciers got up and ran towards the West Door talking excitedly about something.

"What's going on?" Thomas asked, surprising himself at how nonchalantly he said it. New developments in the Glacier had just become a part of life.

Newt shrugged as he dug into his eggs. "Just seen off Minnie and Alby. They're going to look at the bugg'n dead Griever."

"Hey," Chuck said. A small piece of bacon flew out of his mouth when he spoke. "I've got a question about that."

"Yeah, Chuckie?" Newt asked, somewhat sarcastic. "And what's your bloody question?"

Chuck seemed deep in thought. "Well, they found a dead Griever, right?"

"Yeah," Newt replied. "Thanks for that lot of news."

Chuck absently tapped his fork against the table for a few seconds. "Well, the one who *killed* the stupid thing?"

Excellent question, Thomas thought. He waited for Newt to answer, but nothing came. He obviously didn't have a clue.

CHAPTER 16

Thomas spent the morning with the Keeper of the Gardens, "working his butt off" as Newt would've said. Zart was the tall black-haired kid who'd stood at the front of the place during Bens Banishment and who for some odd reason smelled like sour milk. He didn't say much, but showed Thomas the ropes until he could start working on his own. Weeding, pruning an apricot tree, planting squash and courgette seeds, packing veggies. He didn't love it and mostly ignored the other boys working alongside him, but he didn't hate it nearly as much as what he'd done for Winston at the Blood House.

Thomas and Zart were weeding a long row of young corn when Thomas decided it was a good time to start asking questions. This Keeper seemed a lot more approachable.

"So, Zart," he said.

The Keeper glanced up at him, then resumed his work. The kid had droopy eyes and a long face. For some reason he looked as bored as humanly possible. "Yeah, Greenie, what you want?"

"How many Keepers are there altogether?" Thomas asked.

trying to act casual. "And what are the job options?"

"Well, you got the Bangers, the Slopers, Baggers, Looks, Map-makers, Med-jacks, Track hoes, Blood Hoovers, The Runners, of course I don't know, a few more, maybe. Pretty much keep to myself and my own stuff."

Most of the words were self-explanatory, but Thomas wondered about a couple of them. "What's a Sopper?" He knew that was what Chuck did, but he boy never wanted to talk about it. Refused to talk about it.

"That's what the shanks do that can't do nothing else. Clean toilets, clean the showers, clean the kitchen, clean up the Blood House after a slaughter, everything. Spend one day with them suckers, that'll cure any thoughts of going in that direction. I can tell ya that."

Thomas felt a pang of guilt over Chuck. Felt sorry for him. The kid tried so hard to be everyone's friend, but no one seemed to like him or even pay attention to him. Yeah, he was a little extroverted and talked too much, but Thomas was glad enough to have him around.

"What about the Track hoes?" Thomas asked as he yanked out a huge web of chains of wire swaying on the floor.

Zart cleared his throat and kept on working as he answered. "They're the ones that take care of all the heavy stuff for the gardens. Trenching and what not. During off times they do other stuff around the place. Actually a lot of sliders have more than one job. Anyone else ya want?"

Thomas ignored the question and moved on, determined to get as many answers as possible. "What about the Baggers? I know they take care of dead people, but it can't happen *that* often, can it?"

Those are the creepy ones. They act as guards and police too. Everyone just likes to call 'em Baggers. Have fun that day, brother." He sniggered the first time Thomas had heard him do so. There was something very likable about it.

Thomas had more questions. Lots more. Chuck and

everyone else around the table never wanted to give him the answers to anything. And here was Zarr, who seemed perfectly willing. But suddenly Thomas didn't feel like talking any more. For some reason the girl had popped into his head again, out of the blue, and then thoughts of Ben, and the dead Griever, which should have been a good thing but everyone acted as if it were anything but.

His new life pretty much sucked.

He drew a deep, long breath. *Just work*, he thought. And he did.

By the time mid-afternoon arrived, Thomas was ready to collapse from exhaustion. All that bending over and crawling around on your knees in the dirt was the pits. Blood House Gardens. Two strikes.

Runner, he thought as he went on his break. *Just let me be a Runner*. Once again he thought about how absurd it was that he wanted it so badly. But even though he didn't understand it or where it came from, the desire was undeniable. Just as strong were thoughts of the girl, but he pushed them aside as much as possible.

Tired and sore, he headed to the kitchen for a snack and some water. He couldn't have eaten a full grown meal despite having had lunch just two hours earlier. Even pig was starting to sound good again.

He bit into an apple, then plopped onto the ground beside Chuck. Newt was there, too, but sat alone, ignoring everybody. His eyes were bloodshot, his forehead creased with heavy lines. Thomas watched as Newt chewed his fingernails, something he hadn't seen the older boy do before.

Chuck noticed and asked the question that was on Thomas's mind. "What's wrong with him?" the boy whispered. "Looks like you did it when you popped out of the Box."

"I don't know," Thomas replied. "Why don't you go and ask him?"

"I can hear every bloody word you guys are saying," Newt called in a loud voice. "No wonder people hate sleep'n next to you shanks."

Thomas felt like he'd been caught stealing, but he was genuine & concerned. Newt was one of the few people in the Grade he actually liked.

"What's wrong with you?" Chuck asked. "No offence, but you look like klunk."

"Every damn thing in the universe," he replied, then fell silent as he stared off into space for a long moment. Thomas almost pushed him with another question, but Newt finally continued. "The girl from the Box keeps groan'n and say'n all kinds of weird stuff but won't wake up. Med-jacks are doing their best to feed her, but she's eatin' less each time. I'm real'n va someth'ngs very bad about that whole bloody thing."

Thomas looked down at his apple then took a bite. It tasted sour now. He realised he was worried about the girl. Concerned for her welfare. As if he knew her.

Newt let out a long sigh. "Shit n. But that's not what *really* has me buggin'."

"Then what does?" Chuck asked.

Thomas leaned forward so far as he was able to put the girl out of his mind.

Newt's eyes narrowed as he looked out towards one of the entrances to the Maze. "Alby and Minho," he muttered. "They should've come back hours ago."

Before Thomas knew it he was back at work, pulling up weeds again, counting down the minutes until he'd be done with the Gardens. He glanced constantly at the West Door, looking for any sign of Alby and Minho. Newt's concern having rubbed off on him.

Newt had said they were supposed to have come back by noon, just enough time for them to get to the dead Griever, explore for an hour or two, then return. No wonder he'd looked so upset. When Chuck offered up that maybe they were just

exploring and having some fun, Newt had given him a stare so harsh Thomas thought Chuck might spontaneously combust.

He'd never forget the next look that had come over Newt's face. When Thomas asked why Newt and some others didn't just go into the Maze and search for their friends, Newt's expression had changed to outright horror – his cheeks had *shrunk* into his face, becoming sad and dark. It gradually passed, and he'd explained that sending out search parties was forbidden. Not even more people he lost, but there was no mistaking the fear that had crossed his face.

Newt was terrified of the Maze.

Whatever had happened to Frypan out there – maybe even related to his lingering ankle injury – had been truly awful.

Thomas tried not to think about it as he put his focus back to yanking weeds.

That night dinner proved to be a sombre affair, and it had nothing to do with the food. Frypan and his cooks served up a grand meal of steak, mashed potatoes, green beans and hot rolls. Thomas was quickly learning that jokes about Frypan's cooking were just that – jokes. Everyone gobbled up his food and usually begged for more. But tonight, the Gladers ate like dead men resurrected for one last meal before being sent to live with the devils.

The Runners had returned at their normal time, and Thomas had grown more and more upset as he watched Newt run from Door to Door as they entered the Glade, not bothering to hide his panic. But Alby and Minho never showed up. Newt forced the Gladers to go on and get some of Frypan's late-earned dinner, but he insisted on standing watch for the missing duo. No one said it, but Thomas knew it wouldn't be long before the Doors closed.

Thomas reluctantly followed orders like the rest of the boys and was sharing a picnic table on the south side of the Home, seated with Chuck and Winston. He'd only been able to eat a

few bites when he could not take it any more.

"I can't stand sitting here while they're out there missing," he said as he dropped his fork on the plate. "I'm going over to watch the Doors with Newt." He stood up and headed out to look.

Not surprisingly, Chuck was right behind him.

They found Newt at the West Door, pacing, running his hands through his hair. He looked up as Thomas and Chuck approached.

"Where *are* they?" Newt said, his voice thin and strained.

Thomas was touched that Newt cared so much about Abby and Malin—as if they were his own kin. "Why don't we send out a search party?" he suggested again. It seemed so stupid to sit here and worry themselves to death when they could go out there and *find* them.

"Buddy, he—" Newt started, before stopping himself; he closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. "We can't. Okay? Don't say it again. One hundred percent against the rules. Especially with the biggest Doors about to close."

"But why?" Thomas persisted, annoyed at Newt's stubbornness. "Won't the Grievors get them if they stay out there? Shouldn't we do something?"

Newt turned on him; his face flushed red, his eyes flamed with fury.

"Shut your hole, Grievor!" he yelled. "Not a bloody week you've been here! You think I wouldn't risk my life in a second to save those kids?"

"No—I'm sorry I didn't mean—" Thomas didn't know what to say—he was just trying to help.

Newt's face softened. "You don't get it yet, Tommy. Going out there at night is begging for death. We'd just be throwing more lives away if those shanks don't make it back—" He paused, seeming hesitant to say what everyone was thinking. "Both of 'em swore an oath. Just like I did. Like we all did. You, too, when you go to your first Gathering and get chosen by a

Keeper. Never go out at night. No matter what. Never."

Thomas looked over at Chuck, who seemed as pale-faced as Newt.

"Newt won't say it," the boy said, "so I will. If they're not back, it means they're dead. Minho's too smart to get lost. Impossible. They're dead."

Newt said nothing, and Chuck turned and walked back towards the Homestead, his head hanging low. *Dead?* Thomas thought. The situation had become so grave he didn't know how to react, for a sort of emptiness in his heart.

"The shanks right," Newt said solemnly. "That's why we can't go out. We can't afford to make things become worse than they already are."

He put his hand on Thomas's shoulder, then let it slump to his side. Tears had stoned Newt's eyes, and Thomas was sure that even within the dark chamber of memories that were locked away, out of his reach, he'd never seen someone look so sad. The growing darkness of twilight was a perfect fit for how grim things felt to Thomas.

"The Doors close in two minutes," Newt said, a statement, so succinct and final, it seemed to hang in the air like a barbed shroud caught in a draft of wind. Then he walked away, hunched over, quiet.

Thomas shook his head and looked back into the Maze. He barely knew Aby and Minho. But his chest ached at the thought of them out there, killed by the horrendous creature he'd seen through the window his first morning in the Clute.

A cold humn sounded from all directions, startling Thomas out of his thoughts. Then came the crunching, grinding sound of stone against stone. The Doors were closing for the night.

The right wall rumbled across the ground, spilling dirt and rocks as it moved. The vertical row of connecting rods, so many they seemed to reach the sky far above, slid towards the corresponding beads on the left wall, ready to seal shut until the morning. Once again, Thomas looked in awe at the

massive moving wall – it defied any sense of physics. It seemed impossible.

Then a flicker of movement to the left caught his eyes.

Something stirred inside the Maze – down the long corridor in front of him.

At first, a shot of panic raced through him – he stepped back, worried it might be a Griever. But then two forms took shape, stumbling along the alley towards the Door. His eyes finally focused through the mist – a blindness of fear, and he realised it was Minho with one of Alby's arms draped across his shoulders, practically dragging the boy along behind him. Minho looked up, saw Thomas, who knew his eyes must be bulging out of his head.

"They got him!" Minho shouted, his voice strangled and weak with exhaustion. Every step he took seemed like it could be his last.

Thomas was so stunned by the turn of events, it took a moment for him to act. "Newt!" he finally screamed, forcing his gaze away from Minho and Alby to face the other direction. "They're coming, I can see them." He knew he should run into the Maze and help, but the rule about not leaving the Glade was seared into his mind.

Newt had already made it back to the Homestead, but at Thomas's cry he immediately spun around and broke into a stuttering run towards the Door.

Thomas turned to look back into the Maze and dread washed through him. Alby had slipped out of Minho's catches and fallen to the ground. Thomas watched as Minho tried desperately to get him back on his feet, then – finally giving up – started to drag the boy across the stone floor by the arms.

But they were still thirty metres away.

The right wall was closing fast, seeming to quicken its pace the more Thomas watched it – slow down. There were only seconds left until it shut completely. They had no chance of making it in time. No chance at all.

Thomas turned to look at Newt. Limping along as well as he could, he'd only made it halfway to Thomas.

He nosed back into the Maze, at the closing wall. Only a couple of metres more and he'd be over.

Mr Ho stumbled up ahead, fell to the ground. They weren't going to make it. Time was up. That was it.

Thomas heard Newt scream something from behind him.

"Don't do it, Tommy! Don't you bloody do it!"

The rocks on the right wall seemed to reach back, stretch out their arms for their home, grasping for those little holes that would serve as their resting place for the night. The crunching grinding sound of the Doors filled the air, deafening.

Two metres, one and a half, one.

Thomas knew he had no choice. He *moved* forward. He squeezed past the connecting rods at the last second and stepped into the Maze.

The walls slammed shut behind him, the echo of its boom bouncing off the ivy-covered stone, the mad laughter.

CHAPTER 17

For several seconds, Thomas felt like the world had frozen in place. A thick silence followed the thunderous rumb of the Door closing, and a veil of darkness seemed to cover the sky as if even the sun had been frightened away by what worked in the Maze. Twilight had fallen, and the mammoth walls looked like enormous tombstones in a weed-infested cemetery for giants. Thomas leaned back against the rough rock, overcome by disbelief at what he had just done.

He felt with terror at what the consequences might be.

Then a sharp cry from Abby up ahead snapped Thomas to attention. Minho was moaning. Thomas pushed himself away from the wall and ran to the two Gladders.

Minho had pulled himself up and was standing once again, but he looked terrible, even in the pale light still available. Sweaty, dirty, scratched up. Abby, on the ground, looked worse, his clothes ripped, his arms covered with cuts and bruises. Thomas shuddered. Had Abby been attacked by a Griefer?

"Greenie," Minho said. "It's you. It's that was brave coming in.

out here. Listen up. You're the shuckiest shuck-faced shuck there ever was. You're as good as dead. Just like us."

Thomas felt his face heat up. He'd expected at least a little gratitude. "I couldn't just sit there and leave you guys out here."

"And what good are you with us?" Minho rolled his eyes. "Whatever dude. Break the Number One Rule on yourself whatever."

"You're welcome. I was just trying to help," Thomas said, kicking him in the face.

Minho forced a bitter laugh, then knelt back on the ground besides de Alby. Thomas took a closer look at the collapsed boy and realized just how bad things were. Alby looked on the edge of death. His usually dark skin was turning almost fast and his breaths were quick and shallow.

Hopelessness rained down on Thomas. "What happened?" he asked, trying to put as much anger

Don't wanna talk about it." Minho said as he checked Alby's pulse and bent over to listen to his chest. "Let's just say the Vipers can play dead really well."

This statement took Thomas by surprise. "So he was better? Strange, whatever," as he going through the thought.

"You've got a lot to learn," was all Minho would say.

Thomas wanted to scream. He knew he had a lot to learn, but what was why he was asking questions. "Is he going to die?" he forced himself to say, cringing at how shallow and empty it sounded.

"Since we don't make it back before sunset, probably. Could be dead in an hour. I don't know how long it takes if you don't get the serum. Course, we'll be dead, too, so don't get all weepy or burn. Yep, we'll all be nice and dead soon." He said it so matter-of-factly. Thomas could hardly process the meaning of the words.

But fast enough, the dire reality of the situation began to hit Thomas, and his insides turned to rot. "We're really going to

die?" he asked, unable to accept it. "You're telling me we have no chance?"

"None."

Thomas was annoyed at Minho's constant negativity. "Oh, come on – there has to be something we can do. How many Grievors'll come at us?" He peered down the corridor that led deeper into the Maze, as if expecting the creatures to arrive then, summoned by the sound of their name.

"I don't know."

A thought sprang into Thomas's mind, giving him hope. "But... what about Ben? And Gally, and others who've been stung and survived?"

Minho glanced up at him with a look that said he was dumber than cow klunk. "Didn't you hear me? They made it back before sunset, you dong. Made it back and got the Serum. All of them."

Thomas wondered about the mention of a serum, but had too many other questions to get out first. "But I thought the Grievors only came out at night."

"Then you were *wrong*, shank. They *always* come out at night. That doesn't mean they never show up during the day."

Thomas wouldn't allow himself to give in to Minho's hopelessness. He didn't want to give up and die just yet. "Has anyone ever been caught outside the walls at night and lived through it?"

"Never."

Thomas slowed, wishing he could find one little spark of hope. "How many have died, then?"

Minho stared at the ground, crouched with one forearm on a knee. He was clearly exhausted, almost in a daze. "At least twelve. Haven't you been to the graveyard?"

"Yeah." *So that's how they died*, he thought.

"Well, those are just the ones we *found*. There are more whose bodies never showed up." Minho pointed absently back towards the sealed-off Glade. "That freaking graveyard's back

in the woods for a reason. Nothing like his happy time more than being reminded of your slaughtered friends every day."

Minho stood and grabbed Abby's arms, then nodded towards his feet. "Grab those smelly suckers. We've gotta carry him over to the Door Cave. Get one body that's easy to find in the morning."

Thomas couldn't believe how *married* a statement that was "How can this be happening?" he screamed to the walls, turning in a circle. He felt close to losing it once and for all.

"Quit your crying. You should've followed the rules and stayed inside. Now come on, grab his legs."

Winning at the growing cramps in his gut, Thomas walked over and tried Abby's feet as he was ~~was~~. They had carried that cragged the almost lifeless body thirty metres or so to the vertical crack of the Door where Minho propped Abby up against the wall in a semi-sitting position. Abby's chest rose and fell with struggled breaths, but his skin was stretched in sweat, he looked like he wouldn't last much longer.

"Where was he bitten?" Thomas asked. "Can you see it?"

"They don't break *ing* *the* you. They prick you. And no, you can't see it. There could be dozens all over his body." Minho folded his arms and leaned against the wall.

For some reason, Thomas thought the word *prick* sounded a lot worse than ~~prick~~. "Prick you? What does that mean?"

"Didn't you just have to see them to know what I'm talking about?"

Thomas pointed at Minho's arms, then his legs. "Where was it? Didn't the thing *prick* you?"

Minho held his hands out. "Maybe it did... maybe it'll collapse any second."

They... Thomas began, but didn't know how to finish. He couldn't tell if Minho had been serious.

"There was no *they*... it the one we *thought* was dead. It went *its* and stung Abby, but then ran away. Minho looked back into the Maze, which was now almost completely dark.

with night time. "But I'm sure it and a whole bunch of them suckers I be here soon to finish us off with their needles."

"Needles?" Things just kept sounding more and more disturbing to Thomas.

"Yeah needles." He didn't elaborate, and his face said he didn't plan to.

Thomas looked up at the enormous walls covered in thick vines. Desperation had finally clicked him into problem-solving mode. "Can't we climb this thing?" He looked at Minho who didn't say a word. "The vines... can't we climb them?"

Minho let out a frustrated sigh. "I swear Greenie, you must think we're a bunch of idiots. You really think we've never had the ingenious thought of climbing the freaking *walls*?"

For the first time Thomas felt anger creeping in to compete with his fear and panic. "I'm just trying to help, man. Why are you giving it up? It's happening at every wall. Say and *talk* to me!"

Minho abruptly jumped at Thomas and grabbed him by the shirt. "You don't *understand*, shuck face! You don't know anything, and you're just making it worse by trying to have hope. We're dead, you hear me? Dead."

Thomas didn't know which he felt more strongly at that moment—anger at Minho or pity for him. He was giving up too easily.

Minho looked down at his hands clasped to Thomas's shirt and sweat washed across his face. Slowly he let go and backed away. Thomas straightened his clothes defiantly.

"Ah man... oh man..." Minho whispered, then crumpled to the ground burying his face in clenched fists. "I've never been this scared before dude. Not like this."

Thomas wanted to say something, tell him to grow up, tell him to *man* it. But in the end he said everything he knew. Something.

He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it quickly when he heard the *noise*. Minho's head popped up, he looked down

one of the darkened stone corridors. Thomas felt his own breath quicken.

It came from deep within the Maze, a low, haunting sound. A constant whirring that had a metallic ring every few seconds, like sharp knives rubbing against each other. It grew louder by the second, and then a series of eerie clicks joined in. Thomas thought of long fingernails tapping against glass. A hollow moan filled the air, and then something that sounded like the clanking of chains.

All of it, together, was horrifying, and the small amount of courage Thomas had gathered began to slip away.

Minho stood, his face barely visible in the darkness. But when he spoke, Thomas imagined his eyes were with terror. "We have to split up. It's our only chance. Just keep moving. Don't stop moving!"

And then he turned and ran, disappearing in seconds, swallowed by the Maze and darkness.

CHAPTER 18

Thomas stared at the spot where Mr. B. had vanished. A sudden spike for the guy swelled up inside him. Minho was a veteran in this place, a Runner. Thomas was a Newbie, just a few days in the Glade, a few minutes in the Maze. Yet of the two of them, Minho had broken down and panicked, only to run off at the first sign of trouble. *How could he leave me here?* Thomas thought. *How could he do that?*

The noises grew louder. The roar of engines interspersed with ringing, cranking sounds like chains hoisting machinery in an old, grimy factory. And then came the smell—something burning, oily. Thomas couldn't begin to guess what was in store for him; he'd seen a Griever, but only a glimpse, and through a dirty window. What would they do to him? How long would he last?

Stop, he told himself. He had to quit wasting time waiting for them to come and end his life.

He turned and faced Abby, still propped against the stone wall, now only a mound of shadow in the darkness, kneeling

on the ground. Thomas found Abby's neck, then searched for a pulse. Something there. He listened to his chest like Mingo had done.

bub-bump, bub-bump, bub-bump

Still alive.

Thomas rocked back on his heels, then ran his arm across his forehead, wiping away the sweat. And at that moment, in the space of only a few seconds, he learned a lot about himself. About the Thomas that was *before*.

He couldn't leave a friend to die. Even someone as cranky as Abby.

He reached down and grabbed both of Abby's arms, then squatted into a sitting position and wrapped the arms around his neck from behind. He pulled the lifeless body onto his back and pushed with his legs, grunting with the effort.

But it was too much. Thomas collapsed forward, on to his face. Abby sprawled to the side with a loud flump.

The frightening sounds of the vinevipers grew quieter by the second, echoing off the stone walls of the Maze. Thomas thought he could see bright flashes of light far away, bouncing off the night sky. He didn't want to meet the source of those lights, those sounds.

Trying a new approach, he grabbed Abby's arms again and started dragging him along the ground. He couldn't believe how *heavy* the boy was, and it took only three metres or so for Thomas to realise that it just wasn't going to work. Where would he take him, anyway?

He pushed and pulled Abby back over to the crack that marked the entrance of the Gade, and propped him once more into a sitting position, leaning against the wall.

Thomas sat back against himself, parting from exertion to resting. As he looked into the dark recesses of the Maze, he searched his mind for a solution. He could hardly see anything, and he knew, despite what Mingo had said, that he'd be stupid to run even if he *could* carry Abby. Not only was there the

chance of getting lost, he could actually find himself running towards the Grovers instead of away from them.

He thought of the wall, the ivy. Minho had it explained, but he had made it sound as if climbing the walls was impossible. Still . . .

A plan formed in his mind. It all depended on the unknown abilities of the Grovers, but it was the best thing he could come up with.

Thomas walked a metre or so along the wall until he found a thick growth of ivy covering most of the stone. He reached down, grabbed one of the vines that went all the way to the ground, and wrapped his hand around it. It felt thicker and more solid than he would've imagined, maybe a centimetre in diameter. He pulled on it, and with the sound of thick paper ripping apart, the vine came unattached from the wall. More and more as Thomas stepped away from it. When he'd moved back three metres, he could no longer see the end of the vine way above; it'd disappeared in the darkness. But the trailing part had yet to fall free, so Thomas knew it was still attached up there somewhere.

Hesitant to try, Thomas steadied himself and pulled on the vine of ivy with all his strength.

It held.

He yanked on it again. Then again, pulling and relaxing with both hands over and over. Then he lifted his feet and hung onto the vine, his body swinging forward.

The vine held.

Quickly, Thomas grabbed other vines, ripping them away from the wall, creating a series of swinging ropes. He tested each one, and they all proved to be as strong as the first. Encouraged, he went back to Alby and dragged him over to the vines.

A sharp crack echoed from within the Maze, followed by the horrible sound of clanging metal. Thomas started swinging around to look, his mind so concentrated on the vines

that he a momentary shut out the Griefers, he searched all three directions of the Maze. He could not see anything coming, but the sounds were louder—the whirring, the groaning, the clanging. And the air had brightened ever so slightly; he could make out more of the details of the Maze than he had been able to just minutes before.

He remembered the odd lights he'd observed through the Glass window with Newt. The Griefers were close. They had to be.

Thomas pushed aside the swelling panic and set himself to work.

He grabbed one of the vines and wrapped it around Aby's right arm. The plant would only reach so far, so he had to prop Aby up as much as he could to make it work. After several wraps, he tied the vine off. Then he took another vine and put it around Aby's left arm, then both of his legs, tying each one tightly. He worried about the Griefers' circulation getting cut off, but decided it was worth the risk.

Irving to ignore the doubt that was seeping into his mind about the plan, Thomas continued on. Now it was his turn.

He snatched a vine with both hands and started to climb, dived over the spot where he'd just tied up Aby. The thick leaves of the ivy served well as handholds, and Thomas was elated to find that the many cracks in the stone wall were perfect supports for his feet as he climbed. He began to think how easy it would be without

He refused to finish the thought. He couldn't leave Aby behind.

Once he reached a point a metre or so above his friend, Thomas wrapped one of the vines around his own chest, around and around several times, snagging against his armpits for support. Slowly he let himself sag, letting go with his hands but keeping his feet paired firmly in a large crack. Relief flooded him when the vine held.

Now came the really hard part

The four vines tied to Alby below hung tautly around him. Thomas took hold of the one attached to Alby's left leg, and pulled. He was only able to get it up a few centimetres before letting go - the weight was too much. He couldn't do it.

He climbed back down to the Maze floor, decided to try *pulling* from below instead of *pulling* from above. To test it, he tried raising Alby only half a metre, limb by limb. First, he pushed the left leg up, then tied a new vine around it. Then the right leg. When both were secure, Thomas did the same to Alby's arms - right, then left.

He stepped back, panting, to take a look.

Above, hanging there seemingly lifeless, now a metre higher than he'd been five minutes earlier.

Clangs from the Maze. Whistles. Buzzes. Moans. Thomas thought he saw a couple of red flashes to his left. The Greivers were getting closer, and it was now obvious that there were more than one.

He got back to work.

Using the same method of *pushing* each of Alby's arms and legs up a metre or so at a time, Thomas slowly made his way up the wall. He climbed until he was right below the body, wrapped a vine around his own chest for support, then pushed Alby up as far as he could, limb by limb, and tied them off with vines. Then he repeated the whole process.

Climb, wrap, push up, tie off.

Climb, wrap, push up, tie off. The Greivers at least seemed to be moving slowly through the Maze, giving him time.

Over and over, like by rote, up they went. The effort was exhausting. Thomas heaved in every breath, felt sweat cover every bit of his skin. His hands began to slip and slide on the vines. His feet ached from pressing into the stone cracks. The sounds grew louder - the awful, awful sounds. Still, Thomas worked.

When they'd reached a spot about ten metres off the

ground. Thomas stopped, swaying on the vine heaved around his chest, using his drained, rubbery arms. He turned himself around to face the Maze.

An exhaustion he didn't know possible filled every tiny part of his body. He ached with weariness, his muscles screamed. He couldn't push Alby up another centimetre. He was done.

This was where they'd ~~die~~. Or make the first stand.

He'd known they couldn't reach the top. He only hoped the Grievors wouldn't or wouldn't look above them. Or at the very least, Thomas hoped he could ~~knock~~ light them off from high up, one by one, instead of being overwhelmed on the ground.

He had no idea what to expect, he didn't know if he'd see tomorrow. But here, hanging in the ivy, Thomas and Alby would meet their fate.

A few minutes passed before Thomas saw the first glimmer of light shine off the Maze walls up ahead. The terrible sounds he'd heard escalating for the last hour took on a high-pitched mechanical squeal, like a robotic death veil.

A red light ~~was~~ ~~cast~~ on the wall, caught his attention. He turned and almost screamed out loud. A beetle blade was only centimetres away from him, its spindly legs poking through the ivy and somehow sticking to the stone. The red light of its eye was like a little sun. No bright look at directly, Thomas squinted and tried to focus on the beetle's body.

The torso was a silvery object, maybe seven centimetres in diameter and twenty-five centimetres long. Twelve jointed legs ran along the length of its bottom, spread out, making the thing look like a sweeping yard. The head was impossible to see because of the red beam of light shining right at him, though it seemed stupid, vision is only purpose, perhaps.

But then Thomas saw the most alarming part. He thought he'd seen it before, back in the Citadel when the beetle blade had scouted past him and into the woods. Now it was confirmed, the red light from its eye cast a creepy glow on its capital letters.

streaked across the torso, as if they had been written with blood.

WICKED

Thomas couldn't imagine why that one word would be stamped on the beetle's back unless for the purpose of announcing to the Gladers that it was evil. Wicked.

He knew it had to be a spy for whoever had sent them here.

Aby had told him as much, saying the beetles were how the Creators watched them. Thomas stilled himself, held his breath, hoping that maybe the beetle only detected movement. Long seconds passed, his lungs screaming for air.

With a cluck and then a clack, the beetle turned and scuttled off, disappearing into the ivy. Thomas sucked in a huge gulp of air, then another, feeling the pinch of the vines tied around his chest.

Another mechanical squeal screeched through the Maze, close now, followed by the surge of revved machinery. Thomas tried to imitate Aby's lifeless body hanging limp in the vines.

And then something rounded the corner up ahead, and came towards them.

Something he'd seen before, but through the safety of thick glass.

Something unspeakable.

A Griever.

CHAPTER 19

Thomas stared in horror at the monstrous thing making its way down the long corridor of the Maze.

It looked like an experiment gone terribly wrong, something from a nightmare. Part an autopart machine, the Creever miled and clanked along the stone pathway. Its body resembled a giant slug, sparsely covered in hair and glistening with slime, grotesquely pulsating in and out as it breathed. It had no distinguishable head or tail, but front to back it was at least two metres long, a metre thick.

Every ten to fifteen seconds sharp metal spikes popped through its bulbous flesh and the white creature abruptly curled into a ball and spun forward. Then it would settle, seeming to gather its bearings, the spikes receding back through the muck skin with a sick sharp, gurgling sound, and then this over and over, traveling less a metre or so at a time.

But hair and spikes were not the only things protruding from the Creever's body. Several randomly placed mechanical arms stuck out here and there, each one with a different

purpose. A few had bright lights attached to them. Others had long, metal, jagged needles. One had a three-fingered claw that clamped and unclamped for no apparent reason. When the creature moved, these arms folded and maneuvered to avoid being crushed. Thomas wondered what, or who, could create such frightening, disgusting creatures.

The source of the sounds had been hearing made sense now. When the crawler moved, it made the metallic whirring sound like the spinning blade of a saw. The spikes and the arms explained the creepy clanging sounds: metal against stone. But nothing sent his hair up and down Thomas spine like the haunted, deathly moans that somehow escaped the creature when it started like the sound of dying men on a battlefield.

Seeing it all now, the beast matched with the sounds. Thomas couldn't think of any high mate that could equal this hideous thing coming towards him. He fought the fear, forced his body to remain perfectly still, hanging there in the void. He was sure the only hope was to avoid being noticed.

Maybe it won't see us. He thought. Just maybe. But he really of the situation sank like a stone in his head. The beetle blade had already revealed his exact position.

The Greaver moved and clicked its way closer, zigzagging back and forth, moaning and whirring. Every time it stopped, the metal arms unfolded and turned this way and that, like a roving robot on an alien planet, looking for signs of life. The light cast eerie shadows across the Maze. A faint memory tried to escape the locked box within his mind—shadows on the walls when he was a kid, scaring him. He longed to be back to wherever that was, to run to the man and dad he hoped still lived somewhere, missing him, searching for him.

A strong whiff of something burning, stung his nose: is a sick mixture of overheated engines and charred flesh. He couldn't believe people could create something so horrible and send it after kids.

Trying not to think about it, Thomas closed his eyes for a

fear he had never known filled him to the point of insanity

Still, nothing. No movement, no light, no sound. The anticipation of trying to guess its next move was killing Thomas.

Seconds passed. Minutes. The rope plant dug into Thomas's flesh—his chest felt numb. He wanted to scream at the monster he saw now. *Kill me or go back to your hiding place!*

Then, in a sudden burst of light and sound, the Grever came back to life, whirring and clicking.

And then it started to climb. He waited.

CHAPTER 20

The Griever's spikes tore into the stone, throwing shredded ivy and rock chips in every direction. Its arms shifted about like the legs of the beetle blade, some with sharp picks that drove into the stone for the wall for support. A bright light on the end of one arm pointed directly at Thomas. In a flash, this time, the beam didn't move away.

Thomas felt the last drop of hope drain from his body.

He knew the only option left was to run. *In some ditch*, he thought, as he unravelled the thick vine from his chest. Using his left hand to hold tight to the ledge above him, he finished unwrapping himself and prepared to move. He knew he couldn't go up—that would bring the Griever across the path. A wall of ivy at its base was only an option if he wanted to die as quickly as possible.

He had to go to the side.

Thomas reached out and grabbed a vine had a metre or so to the left of where he hung. Wrapping it around his hand, he yanked on it with a sharp jerk. It held true, just like all the others. A

quick glance below revealed that the Greiver had already halved the distance between them and it was moving faster still, no more pauses or stops.

Thomas let go of the rope he'd used around his chest and heaved his body to the left, scraping along the wall. Before his pendulum swing took him back towards Abby, he reached out for another vine, catching a nice thick one. This time he grabbed it with both hands and turned to plant the bottom of his feet on the wall. He shuffled his body to the right as far as the plant would let him, then let go and grabbed another one. Then another. Like some tree-climbing monkey, Thomas found he could move more quickly than he ever could've hoped.

The sounds of his pursuer went on relentlessly, only now with the bone-shuddering addition of cracking and splintering rock joined in. Thomas swung to the right several more times before he dared to look back.

The Greiver had altered its course from Abby to head directly for Thomas. *Finally*, Thomas thought, *something gone right*. Pushing off with his feet as strongly as he could, swing by swing, he fled the hideous thing.

Thomas didn't need to look behind him to know the Greiver was gaining on him with every passing second. The sounds gave it away. Somehow, he had to get back to the ground, or it would all end quickly.

On the next switch, he let his hand slip a bit before clasping tightly. The ivy-rope burned his palm, but he'd clipped a few metres closer to the ground. He did the same with the next vine. And the next. Three swings later he'd made his way halfway to the Maze floor. Scorching pain flared up both his arms; he felt the sting of raw skin on his hands. The adrenal rush going through his body helped push away his fear—he just kept moving.

On his next swing, the darkness prevented Thomas from seeing a new wall coming in front of him until it was too late.

the corridor ended and turned to the right.

He slammed into the stone ahead, losing his grip on the vine. Throwing his arms out, Thomas flailed, reaching and grasping to stop his plunge to the hard stone below. At the same instant, he saw the Creeper out of the corner of his left eye. It had altered its course and was almost directly reaching out with its clasping claw.

Thomas flung his head away to the ground and grasped it with his arms, almost ripping it out of her sockets at the sudden stop. He pushed off the wall with both feet as hard as he could, swinging his body away from it as fast as he ever charged in with its claw and needles. The mark left in the wall with his right leg, crenelating with the arm attached to the claw. A sharp crack revealed a small victory, but any elation ended when he realised that the momentary swing was now pulling him back down to land right on top of the creature.

Pushing with his arms, Thomas drew his legs together and pulled them tight against his chest. As soon as he made contact with the Creeper's body, disgusting slime glistened over his gushy skin. He kicked out with both feet to push off, squirming to avoid the swarm of needles and claws clinging at him from all directions. He swung his body out and to the left. Then he jumped towards the wall of the Maze, trying to grab another vine. The Creeper's vicious arms snapped and clawed at him from behind. He felt a deep scratch on his back.

Thrusting upwards, Thomas leapt a new vine and caught it with both hands. He gripped the plant just enough to swing himself down as he went to the ground, getting the butt of his butt. As soon as his feet hit the soft stone floor, he took off running, despite the screams of exhaustion from his body.

A morning crash sounded behind him, followed by the rattling crackle of warning of the Creeper. But Thomas refused to look back, knowing every second counted.

He rounded a corner of the Maze, then another, rounding the stone with his feet. He flew as fast as he possibly could.

Somewhere in it so he tracked his own movements, hoping he'd live long enough to use the information to return to the Door again.

Right, then left. Down a long corridor then right again. Left. Right. Two lefts. Another long corridor. The sounds of pursuit from behind didn't relent or fade, but he wasn't *losing* ground either.

On and on he ran, his heart ready to blow its way out of his chest. With great sucking heaves of breath, he tried to get oxygen in his lungs, but he knew he couldn't last much longer. He wondered if it'd just be easier to turn and fight, get it over with.

When he rounded the next corner, he stopped in a huff at the sight in front of him. Panting uncontrollably, he stared.

Three Greivers were up ahead, rolling along as they dug their spikes into the stone, coming directly towards him.

CHAPTER 21

Thomas turned to see his original pursuer still coming, though it had slowed a bit, clasp ing and unclasp ing a metal claw as if mock ing him, laugh ing.

It knows I'm done, he thought. After all, that effort here he was surrounded by Criers. It was over. Not even a week of savageable memory and his life was over.

Almost consumed by grief, he made a decision. He'd go down fighting.

Much preferring one over three, he ran straight towards the Crier that had chased him there. The ugly thing retracted just a centimeter, stopped moving its claw as if struck at its boldness. Taking heart at the slight falter, Thomas started screaming as he charged.

The Crier came to a stop, spikes popping out of its skin, turned forward, ready to collide head-on with its foe. The sudden movement almost made Thomas stop, his brief moment of insane courage washing away, but he kept running.

At the last second before collision, just as he got a close look

at the metal and hair and stone. Thomas planted his left foot and dove to the right. Unable to stop its momentum, the Gnever zoomed straight past him before it shuddered to a halt. — Thomas noticed the thing was moving a lot faster now. With a metallic howl, it swiveled and readied itself to pounce on its victim. But now, no longer surrounded, Thomas had a clear shot away, back down the path.

He scrambled to his feet and sprinted forward. Sounds of pursuit, this time from all four Gnevers, followed close behind. Sure that he was pushing his body beyond its physical limits, he ran on, trying to rid himself of the hopeless feeling that it was only a matter of time before they got him.

Then, three corridors down, two hands suddenly reached out and yanked him into the adjoining hallway. Thomas's heart leaped into his throat as he struggled to free himself. He stopped when he realised it was Minho.

"What—?"

"Shut up and follow me!" Minho yelled, already dragging Thomas away until he was able to get his feet under him.

Without a moment to think, Thomas collected himself. Together, they ran through corridors, taking turn after turn. Minho seemed to know exactly what he was doing, where he was going; he never paused to think about which way they should run.

As they rounded the next corner, Minho attempted to speak. Between heaving breaths, he gasped, "I just saw the dive move you did back there — gave me an idea — we only have to last — a little while longer."

Thomas didn't bother wasting his own breath on questions; he just kept running, following Minho. Without having to look behind him, he knew the Gnevers were gaining ground at an alarming rate. Every bar of his body hurt, inside and out; his lungs cried for him to quit running, but he ran on, hoped his heart would quit pumping.

A few turns later, Thomas saw something ahead of them

that didn't register with his brain. It seemed... wrong. And the faint light emanating from their pursuers made the oddity up ahead all the more apparent.

The corridor didn't end in another stone wall.
It ended in blackness.

Thomas narrowed his eyes as they ran towards the wall of darkness, trying to comprehend what they were approaching. The two ivy-covered walls on either side of him seemed to intersect with nothing but sky up ahead. He couldn't see stars. As they got closer, he finally realised that it was an opening—the Maze ended.

How? he wondered. *After years of searching how did Minho and I find it this easily?*

Minho seemed to sense his thoughts. "Don't get excited," he said, barely able to get the words out.

A metre or two before the end of the corridor, Minho pulled up, holding his hand out over the mazes, as if to make sure he stopped, too. Thomas slowed, then walked up to where the Maze opened out into open sky. The sounds of the onrushing Griefers grew closer, but he had to see.

They had indeed reached a way out of the Maze, but like Minho had said, it was nothing to get excited about. All Thomas could see in every direction, up and down, side to side, was empty air and fading stars. It was a strange and unsettling sight—like he was standing at the edge of the universe, and for a brief moment, he was overcome by vertigo, his knees weakening before he steadied himself.

Dawn was beginning to make its mark, the sky seeming to have lightened considerably even in the last minute or so. Thomas stared in complete disbelief at, understanding how it could all be possible. It was like somebody had built the Maze and then set it afloat in the sky to hover there in the middle of nothing for the rest of eternity.

"Don't get it," he whispered, not knowing if Minho could even hear him.

"Careful," the Runner replied. "You wouldn't be the first shark to fall off the Cliff." He grabbed Thomas's shoulder. "Did you forget something?" He nodded back towards the inside of the Maze.

Thomas remembered hearing the word *Cliff* before, but couldn't place it at the moment. Seeing the vast open sky in front of and below him had put him into some kind of hypnotized stupor. He shook himself back to reality and turned to face the oncoming Grievors. They were now only dozens of metres away, single file, charging in with a vengeance, moving surprisingly fast.

Everything cooked then, even before Minho explained what they were going to do.

"These things may be vicious," Minho said, "but they're dumb as dirt. Stand here, close to me, facing—"

Thomas cut him off. "I know, I'm ready."

They shuffled their feet until they stood scrunched up together in front of the drop-off at the very middle of the corridor, facing the Grievors. Their heels were only centimetres from the edge of the Cliff behind them, nothing but air waiting after that.

The only thing left for them was courage.

"We need to be in sync," Minho yelled, almost drowned out by the ear-splitting sounds of the thundering spikes rolling along the stone. "On my mark."

Why the Grievors had lined up single file was a mystery. Maybe the Maze proved just narrow enough to make it awkward for them to travel side by side. But one after the other they rolled down the stone hallway, creaking and moaning and ready to kill. Dozens of metres had become three or four, and the monsters were only seconds away from crashing into the waiting boys.

"Ready," Minho said steadily. "Not yet... not yet..."

Thomas hated every millisecond of waiting. He just wanted to close his eyes and never see another Griever again.

"Now!" screamed Minho.

Just as the first Griever's arm extended out to snap at them, Minho and Thomas dove in opposite directions, each towards one of the outer walls of the corridor. The machine had worked for Thomas earlier and suddenly, by the horrible screeching sound that escaped the first Griever, it had worked again. The monster flew off the edge of the cliff. Oddly, its battle cry cut off sharply instead of fading as it plummeted to the depths beyond.

Thomas landed against the wall and spun just in time to see the second creature tumble over the edge, not able to stop itself. The machine planted a heavy spiked arm into the stone, but its momentum was too much. The nerve-grinding squeal of the spike cutting through the ground sent a shiver up Thomas's spine. Though a second later the Griever tumbled into the abyss. Again neither of them made a sound as they fell, as if they'd disappeared instead of falling.

The fourth and final approaching creature was able to stop for time, teetering on the very edge of the cliff, a spike and a claw holding it in place.

Instinctively, Thomas knew what he had to do. Looking to Minho, he shouted, then turned. Both boys ran in at the Griever and jumped feet first at the creature, kicking out at the last second with every waning bit of strength. They both connected, sending the last monster plummeting to its death.

Thomas lay scrambled to the edge of the abyss, poking his head over to see the falling Griever. But, impossibly, they were gone. Not even a sign of them in the emptiness that stretched below. Nothing.

His mind could not process the thought of where the cliff led or what had happened to the terrible creatures. His last ounce of strength disappeared and he curled into a ball on the ground.

Then, finally, came the tears.

CHAPTER 22

Half an hour passed.

Neither Thomas nor Minho had moved a centimetre. Thomas had finally stopped crying; he couldn't help wondering what Minho would think of him, or if he'd tell others, calling him a sissy. But there wasn't a shred of self-control left in him; he couldn't have prevented the tears. He knew that. Despite his lack of maturity, he was sure he'd just been through the most traumatic night of his life. And his sore hands and utter exhaustion didn't help.

He crawled to the edge of the Cliff once more, stuck his head over again to get a better look now that dawn was in full force. The open sky in front of him was a deep purple, slowly fading into the bright blue of day, with tinges of orange from the sun on a distant, flat horizon.

He stared straight down, saw that the stone wall of the Maze went towards the ground in a sheer cliff and it disappeared into whatever lay far, far below. But even with the ever-increasing light, he still couldn't tell what was down there. It

seemed as if the Maze was perched on a structure several miles above the ground.

But that was impossible, he thought. *It can't be this to be an illusion.*

He rolled over onto his back, groaning at the movement. Things seemed to hurt on him and inside him as a he'd never known existed. At least the Doors would be opening soon, and they could return to the Guide. He looked over at M who huddled against the half of the corridor. "I can't believe we're still alive," he said.

M who said nothing, just nodded, his face devoid of expression.

"Are there more of them? Did we just kill them all?"

M who snorted. "Somehow we made it to suit see, or we would've had ten more on our butts before long." He shivered his body, wincing and groaning. "I can't believe it. Seriously. We made it through the whole night - never been done before."

Thomas knew he should feel proud, brave, something. But all he felt was tired and relieved. "What did we do different?"

"I don't know. It's kinda of hard to ask a dead guy what he did wrong."

Thomas couldn't stop wondering about how the Griefers' enraged cries had ended as they fell from the Cliff, and how he hadn't been able to see them plummeting to their deaths. There was something very strange and unsettling about it. "Seems like they disappeared or something after they went over the edge."

"Yeah, that was kinda psycho. Couple of Gladers had a theory that other things had disappeared, but we proved 'em wrong. Look."

Thomas watched as M who tossed a rock over the Cliff, then followed its path with his eyes. Down and down it went, not leaving his sight until it grew too small to see. He turned back towards M who. "How does that prove them wrong?"

Minho shrugged. "Well, the rock didn't disappear, now, did it?"

"Then what do you think happened?" There was something significant here, Thomas could feel it.

Minho shrugged again. "Maybe they're magic. My head hurts too much to think about it."

With a joint all thoughts of the Cliff were forgotten. Thomas remembered Aby. "We have to get back." Straining, he forced himself to get to his feet. "Gotta get Aby off the wall." Seeing the look of confusion on Minho's face, he quickly explained what had done with the ropes of ivy.

Minho looked down. His eyes detected. "No way. It's still alive."

Thomas refused to believe it. "How do you know? Come on." He started jumping back along the corridor.

"Because no one's ever made it..."

He trailed off and Thomas knew what he was thinking. "That's because they've always been killed by the Greivers by the time you found them. Aby was only stuck with one of those needles, right?"

Minho stood up and joined Thomas in his slow walk back towards the Glace. "I don't know. I guess this has never happened before. A few guys have been stung by one needles during the day. And those are the ones who got the Serum and went through the Changing. The poor shanks who got stuck out in the Maze all night weren't found until later... days later... sometimes... if at all. And all of them were killed in ways you don't wanna hear about."

Thomas shuddered at the thought. "After what we just went through, I think I can imagine."

Minho looked up, surprise transforming his face. "Wait, you just figured it out. We've been wrong... we've *hopefully* we've been wrong. Because no one who'd been stung and *didn't* make it back by sunset has ever survived, we just assumed that was the point of no return... when it's too late to get the Serum."

He seemed excited by his line of thinking.

They turned yet another corner. Minho suddenly taking the lead. The boy's pace was picking up, but Thomas stayed on his heels, surprised at how familiar he felt with the directions usually even coming into turns before Minho showed the way.

"Okay, this Serum," Thomas said. "I've heard that a couple of times now. What's that? And where does it come from?"

"Just what it sounds like, shank. It's a serum. The Grief Serum."

Thomas forced out a painful laugh. "Just when I think I've learned everything about this stupid place. Why is it called that? And why are the Grievers called Grievers?"

Minho explained as they continued through the endless turns of the Maze, neither one of them eating now. "I don't know where we got the names, but the Serum comes from the Creators—or that's what we call them, at least. It's with the supplies in the Box every week, always has been. It's a treatment or antidote or something, a really inside a medical syringe, really, a use. He made a show of sticking a needle in his arm. "Stick that sucker in someone who's been hung and it saves 'em. They get through the Changing, which sucks—but after that, they're healed."

A minute or two passed in silence as Thomas processed the information; they made a couple more turns. He wondered about the Changing, and what it meant. And for some reason, he kept thinking of the girl.

"Weird, though," Minho finally continued. "We've never talked about it before, if he's still alive, there's really no reason to think Alby can't be saved by the Serum. We somehow got into our dark heads that once the Doors closed, you were done. It's a story I got a see this hanging on the wall thing myself. I think you're stuck in it."

The boys kept walking. Minho almost looking happy, but something was nagging at Thomas. He'd been avoiding it

denying it to himself. "What if another Griever got Alby after I diverted the one chasing me?"

Malcolm looked over at him, a blank expression on his face.

"Let's just hurry is all I'm saying," Thomas said, hoping at that effort to save Alby hadn't been wasted.

They tried to pick up the pace, but their bodies hurt too much and they settled back into a slow walk despite the urgency. The next time they rounded a corner, Thomas faltered, his heart skipping a beat when he saw movement up ahead. Relief washed through him an instant later when he realised it was Newt and a group of Glowers. The West Door to the Glade towered over them and it was open. They'd made it back.

At the boys' appearance, Newt riped over to them. "What happened?" he asked, his stooped form just angry. "How on the bloody—?"

"We'll tell you later," Thomas interrupted. "We have to save Alby."

Newt's face went white. "What do you mean? He's never—"

"Just come here." Thomas headed to the right, craning his neck to look high up at the wall, searching along the thick vines until he found the spot where Alby hung by his arms and legs far above them. Without saying anything, Tom was pointed up, not daring to be relieved yet. He was still there, and in one piece, but there was no sign of movement.

Newt finally saw his friend hanging in the ivy and inhaled back at Thomas. If he'd seemed shocked before, now he looked completely bewildered. "Is he alive?"

Please let him be. Thomas thought. "I don't know. Was when I left him up there."

"When you left him—?" Newt shook his head. "Y'ea and Malcolm, get your bars inside, get yourselves checked by the Medwicks. You look bloody awful. I want the whole story when they've finished and you're rested up."

Thomas wanted to wait and see if Alby was okay. He started

to speak but Minho grabbed him by the arm and forced him to walk towards the Glade. "We need sleep. And handages. Now."

And Thomas knew he was right. He re-enters, glancing back up at Alas, then followed Minho out and away from the Maze.

The walk back into the Glade and then to the Homestead seemed endless: a row of Gladers on both sides gawking at them. Their faces showed complete awe as if they were watching two ghosts striding through a graveyard. Thomas knew it was because they'd accomplished something never done before, but he was embarrassed by the attention.

He almost stopped walking altogether when he spotted Gally up ahead, arms folded and glaring, but he kept moving. It took every ounce of his willpower but he looked directly at Gally's eyes, never breaking contact. When he got so within a couple of metres, the other boys were left to dig around.

It almost disturbed Thomas how quickly that felt. Almost. The next few minutes were a blur: he sprinted into the Homestead by a complete Mito, tackled up the stairs, a glimpse through a bare window door of someone feeding the horses, a girl in her room, he felt an incredible strong urge to go and see her, to check on her, to do things with her, to see her bed, to see water handages. Finally, he was alone and his head resting on the softest pillow as he tried to slowly close his eyes.

But as he fell asleep, two things would not leave his mind. First, the words he'd seen scrawled across the torso of one of the Gladers: "We ~~ARE~~ not brought back ~~through~~ again and again." The second thing was the girl.

How's a girl, says to him, he knew, a truck was there shaking him awake. It took several seconds for Thomas to get his bearings and see a light. He focused on Gally, groaned. "Let me sleep, you shank."

"I thought you did want to know."

Thomas rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Know what?" He

looked at Chuck again, confused by his big smile.

"He's alive," he said. "Alby's okay - the Serum worked."

Thomas's grogginess was instantly washed away, replaced with relief. It surprised him how much joy the information brought. But then Chuck's next words made him reconsider.

"He's just started the Charging."

As if brought in by the words, a blood-curling scream erupted from a room down the hall.

CHAPTER 23

Thomas wondered long and hard about Abby. It seemed such a victory just to save himself from being taken back from a night in the Maze. But had it been worth it? Now the boy was at home, putting up with the same things as Ben. And what if he became as psychotic as Ben? Troubling thoughts all around.

Twilight fell on the Cellar, and Abby's screams continued to haunt the air. It was impossible to escape the terrible sound, even after Thomas finally talked the Med jacks into letting him go. Weary, sore, hot, tired, and tired of the peering, agitated wasps, the other leader, Newt, had adamantly refused when Thomas asked to see the person he'd risked his life for *at all* only *in the name*. He'd said, and would not be swayed.

Thomas was too tired to pull up a fight. He'd had no idea it was possible to feel so exhausted despite the few hours of sleep he'd got. He'd had too much to do anyway after that and had spent most of the day on a bench on the outskirts of the Dead-heads, watching in despair. The elation of his escape had faded

rapidly, leaving him with pain and thoughts of his new life in the Glade. Every muscle ached, cuts and bruises covered him from head to toe. But even that wasn't as bad as the heavy emotional weight of what he'd been through the previous night. It seemed as if all the realities of living there had finally settled in his mind, like hearing a final diagnosis of terminal cancer.

How could anyone ever be happy in a life like this? he thought. Then, *How could anyone be evil enough to do this to us?* He understood more than ever the passion the Gladers felt for finding the way out of the Maze. It wasn't just a matter of escape. For the first time, he felt a hunger to get revenge on the people responsible for sending him there.

But those thoughts just led back to the hopelessness that had filled him so many times already. If Newt and the others hadn't been able to solve the Maze after two years of searching, it seemed impossible there could actually be a solution. The fact that the Gladers hadn't given up said more about these people than anything else.

And now he was one of them.

This is my life, he thought. *Living in a giant maze surrounded by hideous beasts.* Sadness filled him like a heavy poison. A boy's screams, now distant but still audible, only made it worse. He had to squeeze his hands to his ears every time he heard them.

Eventually the day dragged to a close, and the setting of the sun brought the now familiar grinding of the First Doors closing for the night. Thomas had no memory of his life before the Box, but he was positive he'd just finished the worst twenty-four hours of his existence.

Just after dark, Chuck brought him some dinner and a big glass of cold water.

"Thanks," Thomas said, feeling a burst of warmth for the kid. He scooped the beef and noodles off the plate as fast as his aching arms could move. "I so needed this," he mumbled.

through a big gate. He took a big swig of his drink, then went back to attacking the food. He hadn't realised how hungry he was until he'd started eating.

"You're disgusting when you eat," Chuck said sitting on the bench next to him. "It's like watching a starving pig eat his own dung."

"That's funny," Thomas said, sarcasm in his voice. "You should go entertain the Grievors – see if they laugh."

A quick expression of pain flashed across Chuck's face making Thomas see back out van sheen almost as fast as it had appeared. "That reminds me – you're the talk of the town."

Thomas sat up straighter, not sure how he felt about the news. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Oh gee let me think. First you go out in the Maze when you're not supposed to, at night, then you run into some kind of treacherous little dude climbing vines and tying people up on walls. Next you become one of the first people ever to survive an entire night outside the Citadel and to top it all off you kill four Grievors. Can't imagine what those shanks are talking about."

A surge of pride filled Thomas, his body then fizzled. Thomas was sickened by the happiness he'd as the other Abris was still in bed, screaming his head off in pain – probably *assuming* he were dead. "Telling her to go over the wall was Minho's idea, not mine."

Not according to him. He saw you do the wait and drive thing. I can hear the idea to do the same thing at the wall."

"The wait and drive thing?" Thomas asked, moving his eyes. Any idea on the planer would've done that."

"Don't get all ~~mean~~ ~~mean~~ ~~mean~~ on me – it's what you did – it's freaky and unbelievable. You and Minho both."

Thomas tossed the empty plate on the ground suddenly angry. "Then why don't you feel so crappy, Chuck? Wanna answer me that?"

Thomas searched Chuck's face for an answer, but by the

books of it he didn't have one. The boy just sat clasping his hands as he leaned forward on his knees, head hanging. Finally, half under his breath, he murmured, "Same reason we all feel crappy."

They sat in silence until, a few minutes later, Newt waked up, looking like death on two feet. He sat on the ground in front of them, as sad and worried as any person could possibly appear. Still, Thomas was glad to have him around.

"I think the worst parts over," Newt said. "The bugger should be sleeping for a couple of days, then wake up and maybe a little screaming now and then."

Thomas couldn't imagine how bad the whole ordeal must be but the whole process of the Changing was still a mystery to him. He turned to the older boy, trying his best to be casual. "Newt, what's he going through up there? Seriously, I don't get what this Changing thing is."

Newt's response startled Thomas. "You think we do?" he spat, throwing his arms up then slapping them back down on his knees. "All we bloody know is if the Gnevers sting you with their nasty needles, you inject the Grief Serum or you die. If you do get the Serum, the ivy at oddy ways out and shakes, it gives you a rash and bubbles and turns a freaky green colour and you vomit all over yourself. Enough explanation for ya there, Tommy?"

Thomas frowned. He didn't want to make Newt any more upset than he already was, but he needed answers. "I see. I know it sucks to see your friend go through that, but I just want to know what's really happening up there. Why do you call it the Changing?"

Newt relaxed, seemed a slither over his shoulder. "It brings back memories, just little snippets, but definite memories of before we came to this horrible place. Anyone who goes through it acts like a bloody psycho when it's over, although usually not as bad as poor Ben. Anyway, it's like being given your mind bit back, only to have it snatched away again."

Thomas's mind was churning. "Are you sure?" he asked. Newt looked confused. "What do you mean? Sure about what?"

"Are they *courage* because they want to go back to their old life or is it because they're so depressed at realising their old life was no better than what we have now?"

Newt stared at him for a second, then looked away, seemingly deep in thought. "Shanks who've been through it, never really talk about it. They get... different. Unlikeable. There's a handful around the Glade but I can't stand to be around them." His voice was distant, his eyes having strayed to a certain blank spot in the woods. Thomas knew he was thinking about how Aibie might never be the same again.

"Told me about it." Chuck chimed in. "Cal's the worst of 'em all."

"Anything new on the girl?" Thomas asked, changing the subject. He was in no mood to talk about Calv. Plus his thoughts kept going back to her. "I saw the Medjacks feeding her upstairs."

"No." Newt answered. "She's in the huggin' coma, or whatever it is. Every once in a while she'll murmur some thing nonsense. Like she's dreaming. She takes the food, seems to be doing alright. I'm kind of weird."

A long pause followed as all the three of them were trying to come up with an explanation for the girl. Thomas wondered again about his inexplicable feeling of connection with her, thought *it must* *have* *been* *because* but that could have been because of everything else occupying his thoughts.

Newt finally broke the silence. "Anyway, next up... figure out what we do with Jimmy here."

Thomas perked up at that, confused by the statement. "Do with it or? What're you talking about?"

Newt spread stretched his arms. "Turned this whole place upside down, you bloody shank. Had the Gladers think you're God, the other half wanna throw your butt down the Box

Hole. Lorta stuff to talk about."

"Like what?" Thomas didn't know which was more unsettling - that some people thought he was some kind of hero - or that some wished he didn't exist.

"Patience." Newt said. "You'll find out after the wake-up."

"Tomorrow? Why?" Thomas didn't like the sound of this.

"I've called a Gathering. And you'll be there. You're the only bugger thing on the agenda."

And with that, he turned and walked away, leaving Thomas to wonder why in the world a Gathering was needed just to talk about *him*.

CHAPTER 24

The next morning Thomas found himself sitting in a chair, worried and anxious, sweating, facing eleven other boys. They were seated in chairs arranged in a semicircle around him. Once settled, he realised they were the Keepers and to his chagrin that meant Gaby was among them. One chair directly in front of Thomas stood empty – he didn't need to be told that it was Abby.

They sat in a large room on the Homestead that Thomas hadn't been in before. Besides the chairs, there was no other furniture except for a small table in the corner. The walls were made of wood, as was the floor, and it didn't look like anyone had ever attempted to make the place look inviting. There were no windows, the room smelled of mildew and old books. Thomas wasn't cold, but shivered all the same.

He was at least relieved that Newt was there. He sat in the chair to the right of Abby's empty seat. "In place of our elder, sick in bed, I declare this Gathering begun," he said, with a subtle roll of his eyes as if he feared anything approaching

formal tie. "As you all know the last few days have been a pretty crazy and quite a bit seems centered around our Greenbean Tommy, seated before us."

Thomas's face flushed with embarrassment.

"He's not the Greenie any more." Galy said, his scolding voice so low and cruel it was almost comical. "He's just a rule breaker now."

This started off a rumbling of murmurs and whispers, but Newt shushed them. Thomas suddenly wanted to be as far from that room as possible.

"Galy," Newt said, "try to keep some damn order here. If you're gonna blabber your stuck mouth every time I say something, you can go ahead and bloody leave, because I'm not in a very cheerful mood."

Thomas wished he could cheer at that.

Galy folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, the scowl on his face so forced that Thomas almost laughed out loud. He was having a harder and harder time believing he'd been terrified of this guy just a day earlier. He seemed so, even pathetic now.

Newt gave Galy a hard stare, then continued, "Could we get that out of the way?" Another roll of the eyes. "Reason we're here is because almost every damn kid in the Class has come up to me in the last day or two either boo-hoing about Thomas or begging to take his bloody hand in marriage. We need to decide what we're gonna do with him."

Galy leaned forward, but Newt cut him off before he could say anything.

"You'll have your chance Galy. One at a time. And Tommy, you're not allowed to say a bloody thing until we ask you to. Good that?" He waited for a nod of consent from Thomas, who gave it reluctantly, then pointed to the kid in the chair on the far right. "Zart the Fart, you start."

There were a few sniggers as Zart, the quiet big guy who watched over the Gardens, shifted in his seat. He looked to

Thomas more out of place than a carrot on a tomato plant.

"Well," Zart began, his eyes darting around almost like he was waiting for someone else to tell him what to say. "I don't know we broke one of our most important rules. We can't just let people think that's okay." He paused and looked down at his hands, rubbing them together. "But then again, his changed things. Now we know we can survive out there and that we can beat the Grievors."

Relief flooded Thomas. He had someone else on his side. He made a promise to himself to be extra nice to Zart.

"Oh, give me a break," Gally spat. "I bet Minhos the one who actually got rid of the stupid things."

"Gally, shut your head!" Newt yelled, standing for effect this time. Once again, Thomas felt like cheering. "I'm the bloody Char right now, and if I hear one more buggin' word out of turn from you, I'll be arrangin' and her Banishin' for your sorry butt."

"Please," Gally whispered sarcastically, the ridiculous show returning as he slouched back into his chair again.

Newt sat down and motioned to Zart. "Is that it? Any official recommendations?"

Zart shook his head.

"Okay. You're next, Frypan."

The cook smiled through his beard and sat up straighter. "Stanks got more guts than I've seen up from every pig and cow in the last year." He paused, as if expecting a laugh, but none came. "How stupid is this? He saves Alys, i.e., he's a couple of Grievors, and we're sitting here vappin' about what to do with him. As Chuck would say, this is a pie of kune."

Thomas wanted to walk over and shake Frypan's hand. He'd just said exactly what Thomas himself had been thinking about all of this.

"So what're your recommendations?" Newt asked.

Frypan folded his arms. "Fuh h m, to the breaking Cannon, and have him train us on everything he did out there."

Voices erupted from every direction and it took Newt half a minute to calm everyone down. Thomas warned, Frypan had gone too far with that recommendation, almost invalidating his well-earned opinion of the whole mess.

"Alright, written her down," Newt said as he dropped that scribbling on a notepad. "Now everyone keep their bloody mouths shut. I mean it. You know the rules—no ideas unacceptable—and you'll all have your say when we vote on it." He finished writing and pointed to the bird member of the Council, a kid Thomas hadn't met yet with black hair and a freckly face.

"I don't really have an opinion," he said.

"What?" Newt asked angrily. "Lot of good it did to choose you for the Council, then."

"Sorry, I honestly don't." He shrugged. "If anything, I agree with Frypan. I guess. Why punish a guy for saving someone's life?"

"So you do have an opinion—is that it?" Newt insisted, pencil in hand.

The kid nodded and Newt scribbled a note. Thomas was feeling more and more relieved—it seemed like most of the Keepers were for him, not against him. Still, he was having a hard time, just sitting there, he desperately wanted to speak on his own behalf. But he forced himself to follow Newt's orders and keep quiet.

Next was acne-covered Winstler, Keeper of the Blood House. "I think he should be punished. No violence. Creative, but Newt, you're the one always harping on about *order*. If we don't punish him, we'll set a bad example. He broke our Number One Rule."

"Okay," Newt said, writing on his pad. "So you're recommending punishment. What kind?"

"I think he should be put in the Siammer for a week with only bread and water—and we need to make sure everyone knows about it so they don't get any ideas."

Gaily clapped, earning a scowl from Newt. Thomas heart felt just a bit.

Two more Keepers spoke, one for Freya's sea, one for Winstons. Then it was Newt's turn.

"I agree with the lot of ya. He should be punished, but then we need to figure out a way to use him. I'm reserving my recommendation until I hear everyone out. Next."

Thomas hated all this talk about punishment, even more than he hated having to keep his mouth shut. But deep inside he couldn't bring himself to disagree. As odd as it seemed after what he'd accomplished, he *was* broken a major rule.

Down the line they went. Some thought he should be praised, some thought he should be punished. Or both. Thomas could barely listen any more, anticipating the comments from the last two Keepers, Gaily and Minho. The latter hadn't said a word since Thomas had entered the room; he just sat there, slumped in his chair, looking out. He hadn't slept in a week.

Gaily went first. "I think I've made my opinions pretty clear already."

Great, Thomas thought. *Then just keep your mouth shut.*

"Good that," Newt said with yet another roll of the eyes.

Go on, then, Minho.

"No." Gaily yelled, making a couple of Keepers jump in their seats. "I still wanna say something."

"Then bloody say it," Newt replied, it made Thomas feel a little better that the temporary Council Chair despised Gaily almost as much as he did. Though Thomas wasn't that afraid of him any more, he still hated the guy's guts.

"Just think about it!" Gaily began. "This snakehead comes up to the Box, acting all confused and scared. A few days later he's running around the Maze with Grevers, acting like he owns the place."

Thomas shrank into his chair, hoping that others hadn't been thinking anything like that.

Gally continued his rant. "I think it was all an act. How could he have done what he did - all there after just a few days? I ain't buyin' it."

"What're you tryin' to say, Gally?" Newt asked. "How 'bout having a bloody point?"

"I think he's a spy from the people who put us here."

Another uproar exploded in the room. Thomas could do nothing but shake his head - he just didn't get how Gally could come up with all these ideas. Newt finally calmed everyone down again, but Gally wasn't finished.

"We can't trust this shark," he continued. "I say after he shows up, a psycho grr cones. spoutin off that things are gonna change. Cautchin that freaky note. We find a dead Griever. Thomas proven crazy finds himself in the Maze for the night, then tries to convince everyone he's a hero. Well, neither Minho nor anyone else actually *saw* him do anything in the v ries. How do we know it was the Greenie who tied Aody up there?"

Gally paused; no one said a word for several seconds, and panic rose inside Thomass chest. Could they actually believe what Gally was saying? He was anxious to defend himself and almost broke his silence for the first time - but before he could get a word in, Gally was talking again.

"There's too many weird things goin' on, and that all started when this shuck-face Greenie showed up. And he just happens to be the first person to survive a night out in the Maze. Something ain't right, and until we figure it out - officially recommend that we lock his butt in the Summer - for a month and then have another review."

More ramblings broke out and Newt wrote something on his pad, shaking his head the whole time - which gave Thomas a tinge of hope.

"I trusted Captain Gally?" Newt asked.

"Quit being such a smart aleck, Newt," he spat, his face flushing red. "I'm dead serious. How can we trust this shark

after less than a week. "Quit voting me down before you even *think* about what I'm saying."

For the first time, Thomas felt a true empathy for Gaby: he did have a point about how Newt was treating him. Gaby was a keeper after all. *But still hate him*, Thomas thought.

"Fine, Gaby," Newt said. "I'm sorry. We heard you, and we'll consider your handy recommendation. Are you done?"

"Yes, I'm done. And I'm *right*."

With no more words for Gaby, Newt pointed at Mingo. "Go ahead, last but not least."

Thomas was elated that it was finally Mingo's turn to relay and defend him to the end.

Mingo stood up, taking everyone off guard. "I was out there," saw what this guy did," he stated strong while I earned no a pants wearing chicken. No babb'n on and on like Gaby. I want to say my recommendation and be done with it."

Thomas held his breath, wondering what he'd say.

"C'mon, that," Newt said to the us, then."

Mingo looked at Thomas. "I don't hate this shark. Replace me as keeper of the Runners."

CHAPTER 25

Complete silence filled the room, as if the world had been frozen, and every member of the Council stared at Minho. Thomas sat stunned, waiting for the Runner to say he'd been kidding.

Gally finally broke the spell, standing up. "That's ridiculous." He faced Newt and pointed back at Minho, who had taken his seat again. "He should be kicked off the Council for saying something so stupid."

Any pity Thomas had felt for Gally, however remote, completely vanished at that statement.

Some Keepers seemed to actually agree with Minho's recommendation. Like Frypan, who clapped to drown out Gally, clamouring to take a vote. Others didn't. Winston shook his head adamantly, saying something that Thomas couldn't quite make out. When everyone started talking at once, Thomas put his head in his hands to wait it out, terrified and awed at the same time. Why had Minho said that? *Has to be a joke*, he thought. *Newt said it takes forever just to become a Runner,*

man test the keeper. He looked back up, wishing he were a thousand miles away.

Finally, Newt put his notepad down and stepped out from the semicircle, screaming at people to shut up. Thomas watched on as at first no one seemed to hear or notice Newt at all. Gradually, though, order was restored and everyone sat down.

"Shuck it," Newt said. "I've never seen so many shanks acting like not suckin' babies. We may not look it, but around these parts we're adults. Act like it, or we'll disband this bloody Council and start from scratch." He walked from end to end of the curved row of sitting keepers, looking each of them in the eye as he spoke. "Are we clear?"

Quiet had swept across the group. Thomas expected more outbursts, but was surprised when everyone nodded their consent, even Gaby.

"Good that," Newt walked back to his chair and sat down, putting the pad on his lap. He scratched out a few lines on the paper, then looked up at Minho. "That's some pretty serious kunk, brother. Sorry, but you need to talk it up to move it forward."

Thomas couldn't help feeling eager to hear the response.

Minho looked exasperated, so he started defending his proposal. "It's easy for you shanks to sit here and talk about something you're stupid on. I'm the only Runner in this group, and the only other one here who's even *been* out in the Maze is Newt."

Gaby interjected. "Not if you count the time I—"

"I don't," Minho shouted. "And believe me, you're nobody else but the slightest clue what it's like to be out there. The only reason you were stung is because you broke the same rule you're blaming Thomas for. That's called *hypocrisy*, you shuck-faced piece of—"

"Enough," Newt said. "Defend your proposal and be done with it."

The tension was palpable. Thomas felt like the air in the room was become glass that would shatter at any second. Both Gary and Minho looked as if the taut red skin of their faces was about to burst, but they finally broke their stare.

"Anyway, listen to me," Minho continued as he took his seat. "I've never seen anything like it. He didn't panic. He didn't whine and cry. He never seemed scared. Dude, he's been here for just a few days. Think about what we were all like in the beginning. Huddling in corners, disoriented, crying every hour, not trusting anybody, refusing to do anything. We were all like that for weeks or months, until we had no choice but to shut up and live."

Minho stood back up, pointed at Thomas. "Just a few days after this guy shows up, he steps out in the Maze to save two shanks he hardly knows. All this klunk about him breaking a rule is just beyond stupid. He didn't get the rules yet. But plenty of people had told him what it's like in the Maze, especially at night. And he still stepped out there, just as the Door was closing, only caring that two people needed help." He took a deep breath, seeming to gain strength the more he spoke.

"But that was just the beginning. After that, he saw me give up on Abby, leave him for dead. And I was the veteran—the one with all the experience and knowledge. So when Thomas saw me give up, he shouldn't have questioned it. But he did. Think about the willpower and strength it took him to push Abby up that wall, centimetre by centimetre. It's psychotic, it's freaking crazy."

But that wasn't it. Then came the Grievers. I told Thomas we had to spit up and started the practised evasive manoeuvres, running in the patterns. Thomas, when he should've been worried his pants' mock control defied all laws of physics and gravity to get Abby up onto that wall, diverted the Grievers away from him, beat one off, found—"

"We get the point," Gary snapped. "Tommy here is a lucky shank."

Minho rounded on him. "No, you worthless shack, you *don't* get it. I've been here two years and I've never seen anything like it. For you to say anything."

Minho paused, rubbing his eyes, growling in frustration. Thomas realised his own mouth had dropped wide open. His emotions were scattered: appreciation for Minho standing up to everybody on his behalf; disbelief at Gally's continuous beligerence; fear of what the final decision would be.

"Calve," Minho said in a calmer voice, "you're nothing but a sissy who has never not once asked to be a Runner or tried out for it. You don't have the right to talk about things you don't understand. So shut your mouth."

Gally stood, pagan humming. "Say one more thing like that and I'll break your neck right here in front of everybody." Spit flew from his mouth as he spoke.

Minho laughed. Then raised the palm of his hand and shoved Gally in the face. Thomas had stood as he watched the Grader crash down on his chair, popping it over backwards, cracking it in two pieces. Gally sprawled across the floor, then scrambled to startle up, struggling to get his hands and feet under him. Minho stepped closer and stomped the bottom of his foot down on Gally's back, driving his body flat to the ground.

Thomas stepped back into his seat, stunned.

"I swear Calve," Minho said with a sneer, "don't ever threaten me again. Don't ever *speak* to me again. Ever. If you do, I'll break your neck right after I'm done with your arms and legs."

Newt and Winston were on their feet and glaring at Minho's retreat. Thomas even knew what was going on. They pulled him away from Gally who panted at his face a rumpled mask of rage. But he made no move towards Minho; he just stood there with his chest out, heaving ragged breaths.

Finally Gally backed away, half stumbling towards the exit behind him. His eyes darted around the room, lit with a

burning hatred. Thomas had the sickening thought that Galy looked like someone about to commit murder. He backed towards the door, reached behind him to grab the handle.

"Things are different now," he said, spitting on the floor. "You shouldn't have done that, Micho. You should *not* have done that." His maniacal gaze shifted to Newt. "I know you hate me, that you've always hated me. You should be Banished for your embarrassing inability to lead this group. You're shameful, and any one of you who stays here is no better. Things are going to change. This is promise."

Thomas's heart sank. As if things hadn't been awkward enough already.

Galy yanked the door open and stepped out into the hall, but before anyone could react, he popped his head back in the room. "And you," he said, glaring at Thomas, "the *Greenbean* who thinks he's friggin' God. Don't forget I've seen you before.

I've *been* through the Changing. What these guys decide doesn't mean jack."

He paused, looking at each person in the room. When his malicious stare fell back on Thomas, he had one last thing to say. "Whatever you came here for... I swear on my life I'm gonna stop it. Kill you if I have to."

Then he turned and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER 26

Thomas sat frozen in his chair, a sickness growing in his stomach. He had never before fled been through the whole gamut of emotions in the short time since he'd arrived at the Trade. Fear, loneliness, desperation, sadness, even the slightest hint of joy. But this was something new – to fear a person say they hate you enough that they want to kill you.

Completely crazy, he told himself. *He's completely insane.* But the thought only increased his worries. Insane people could really be capable of anything.

The Council members stood or sat in silence, seemingly as shocked as Thomas at what they'd just seen. Newt and Winston finally let go of Minho and three of them silently walked to their chairs and sat down.

"He's really whacked for good," Minho said, almost in a whisper. Thomas couldn't tell if he'd meant for the others to hear him.

"Well, we're not the bloody saint in the room," Newt said.

"What were you *thinking*? That was a little overboard, don't ya think?"

Minho squinted up his eyes and pulled his head back, as if he were baffled by Newt's question. "Don't give me that garbage. Every one of you loved seeing that skunkhead get his ass, and you know it. It's about time someone stood up to his kunk."

"He's on the Council for a reason," Newt said.

"Dude, he threatened to break my neck and kill Thomas. The guy is mentally whacked, and you better send someone right now to throw him in the Summer. He's dangerous."

Thomas couldn't have agreed more and once again almost broke his order to stay quiet, but stopped himself. He didn't want to get in any more trouble than he was already in, but he didn't know how much longer he could last.

"Maybe he had a good point," Weston said, almost too quietly.

"What?" Minho asked, mirroring Thomas's thoughts exactly.

Weston looked surprised at the acknowledgement that he'd said anything. His eyes darted around the room before he explained. "Well, he *has* been through the Changing Griever stung him in the middle of the day, just outside the West Door. That means he has *memories*, and he said the Greencloaks look familiar. Why wouldn't he make that up?"

Thomas thought about the Changing, and the fact that brought back memories. The idea hadn't occurred to him before, but would it be worth it to get stung by the Greivers, go through that horrible process, just to remember something? He pictured Ben writhing in pain and remembered Abby's screams. *No way*, he thought.

"Weston, did you see what just happened?" Frypan asked, looking incredulous. "Gally's a psycho. You can't put too much stock in his rambling nonsense. What you think Thomas here is a Griever in disguise?"

Council rules or no Council rules. Thomas had finally had enough. He couldn't stay silent another second.

"Can I say something now?" he asked, frustration raising the volume of his voice. "I'm sick of you guys talking about me like I'm not here."

Newt glanced up at him and nodded. "Go ahead. This bloody meeting can't be much more screwed up."

Thomas quickly gathered his thoughts, grasping for the right words inside the swirling cloud of frustration, confusion and anger in his mind. "I don't know why Gally hates me. I don't care. He seems psychotic to me. As for why I *really* am you all know just as much as I do. But it's *remember* correctly were here because of what I did out in the Maze, not because some idiot thinks I'm evil."

Someone sniggered and Thomas stopped talking, hoping he'd got his point across.

Newt nodded, looking satisfied. "Good that. Let's get this meeting over with and worry about Gally later."

"We can't vote without all the members here," Winston insisted. "I guess they're really sick like Abby."

"For the love, Winston," Newt replied. "I'll say it as many times as I like today, too, so we continue without him. Thomas, defend yourself and then we'll take the vote on what we should do with you."

Thomas realized his hands were squeezed up into fists on his lap. He relaxed them and wiped his sweaty palms on his pants. The vote began, not sure if what he'd say before the words came out.

"I didn't do anything wrong. All I know is I saw two people struggling to get inside these walls and they couldn't make it. To ignore that because of some stupid rule seemed selfish, cowardly and... well, stupid. If you want to throw me in jail for trying to save someone's life, then go ahead. Next time I prison-se I'll point at them and laugh, then go and eat some of Frypan's dinner."

Thomas wasn't trying to be funny. He was just dumb-founded that the whole thing could even be an issue.

"Here's my recommendation," Newt said. "You broke our bloody Number One Rule, so you get one day in the Slammer. That's your punishment. I also recommend we elect you as a Runner effective the second this meetings over. You've proven more in one night than most trainees do in weeks. As for you being the buggin' Keeper, forget it." He looked over at Minho. "Gally was right on that count – stupid idea."

The comment hurt Thomass feelings, even though he couldn't disagree. He looked to Minho for his reaction.

The Keeper didn't seem surprised, but argued all the same. "Why? He's the best we have. I swear it. The best should be the Keeper."

"Fine," Newt responded. "If that's true, we'll make the change later. Give it a month and see if he proves himself."

Minho struggled. "Could that?"

Thomas quietly sighed in relief. He still wanted to be a Runner – which surprised him, considering what he'd just gone through out in the Maze – but becoming the Keeper right away sounded ridiculous.

Newt glanced around the room. "Okay, we had several recommendations, so let's give it a go-round."

"Oh, come on," Frypan said. "Just vote. I vote for you, guys."

"Me too," Minho said.

Everyone else chimed in their approval of firing Thomas with relief and a sense of pride. Winston was the only one to say no.

Newt looked at him. "We don't need your vote, but tell us what's borkin' around your brain."

Winston gazed at Thomas carefully, then back to Newt. "I'm fine with me, but we shouldn't totally ignore what Gally said. Something about it... I don't think he just made it up. And it's true that ever since Thomas got here, everything's been shucked and screwy."

"Fair enough," Newt said. "Everyone put some thought into

it maybe when we get right nice and tired we can have another Gathering to talk about it. Good that."

Winston nodded.

Thomas groaned at how invisible he'd become. "I love how you guys are just talking about me like I'm not here."

"Look Tommy," Newt said. "We just elected you as a bug-gon hunter. Get your cryin' and get out of here. Minho has a lot of training to give you."

It had really hit Thomas until then. He was going to be a *Runner*, explore the Maze. Despite everything, the test a shiver of excitement, he was sure they could avoid getting trapped out there at night again. Maybe he'd had his one and only turn of bad luck. "What about my punishment?"

"Tomorrow," Newt answered. "The wake-up at sunset."

One day. Thomas thought. *It won't be so bad.*

The meeting was dismissed and even he except Newt and Minho left the room in a hurry. Newt hadn't moved from his chair where he sat jotting notes. "Well, that was good times," he murmured.

Minho walked over and playfully punched Thomas in the arm. "It's all this shanks fault."

Thomas punched him back. "Keeper. You want me to be Keeper? You're madder than Gally by a long shot."

Minho faked an evil grin. "Worked around it. Arm high, hat low. Thank me later."

Thomas couldn't help smiling at the Keeper's clever ways. A knock on the open door grabbed his attention. He turned to see who it was. Chuck stood there, looking like he'd just been chased by a Griever. Thomas felt the grin fade from his face.

"What's wrong?" Newt asked, standing up. The tone of his voice only heightened Thomas's concern.

Chuck was wringing his hands. "Med-jacks sent me 'Why'."

"I guess Alby's thrashing around and acting all crazy, telling them he needs to talk to some lady."

Newt made for the door, but Chuck held up his hand. "Um, he doesn't want you."

"What do you mean?"

Chuck pointed at Thomas. "He keeps asking for him."

CHAPTER 27

For the second time that day, Thomas was shocked into silence.

"Well, come on," Newt said to Thomas as he grabbed his arm. "There's no way I'm not going with ya."

Thomas followed him, with Chuck right behind, as they left the Courtyard room and went down the hall towards a narrow spiralling staircase that he hadn't noticed before. Newt took the first step, then gave Chuck a cold glare. "You. Stay."

For once, Chuck simply nodded and said nothing. Thomas figured that something about Abby's behaviour had the kids' nerves on edge.

"Lighten up," Thomas said to Chuck as Newt headed up the staircase. "They just elected me a Ranner, so you're buddies with a stud now." He was trying to make a joke, trying to deny that he was terrified to see Abby. What if he made accusations like Ben had? Or worse?

"Yeah, right," Chuck whispered, staring at the wooden steps in a daze.

With a shrug Thomas began climbing the stairs. Sweat slicked his palms, and he felt a drop trickle down his temple. He did *not* want to go up there.

Newt, all grin and solemnity, was waiting for Thomas at the top of the stairwell. They stood at the opposite end of the long, dark hallway from the usual staircase—the one Thomas had climbed on his very first day to see Ben. The memory made him queasy, he hoped. Alby was completely healed from the ordeal, so he didn't have to witness something like that again—the sickly skin, the veins, the thrashing. But he expected the worst, and braced himself.

He noticed Newt in the second door on the right and watched as the older boy knocked lightly; a moan sounded in reply. Newt pushed open the door for the slight creak (once again reminding Thomas of some vague childhood memory of haunted house movies). There it was again—the same least glimpse at his past he could remember movies, but not the actors' faces or with whom he'd watched them. He could remember cinemas, but not what any specific one *looked* like. It was impossible to explain how that felt, even to himself.

Newt had stepped into the room and was encouraging Thomas to follow. As he entered, he prepared himself for the horror that might await. But when his eyes lifted, all he saw was a very weak-looking teenage boy lying in his bed, eyes closed.

"Is he asleep?" Thomas whispered, trying to avoid the real question that had popped in his mind: *He's not dead, is he?*

"I don't know," Newt said quietly. He walked over and sat in a wooden chair next to the bed. Thomas took a seat on the other side.

"Alby," Newt whispered. The y more loudly "Alby Chuck said you wanted to talk to Tommy."

Alby's eyes fluttered open—bloodshot orbs that glistened in the light. He looked at Newt, then across at Thomas. With a groan he shifted in the bed and sat up, his back against the headboard. "Yeah," he muttered, a scratchy croak.

Chuck said you were thrashin' around, actin' like a clown." Newt leaned forward. "What's wrong? You sick?"

Alby's next words came out in a wheeze, as if every one of them were like a week off his feet. "Everythin' gonna change—the girl, Thomas—I saw them—" His eyelids flickered closed, then open again. He sank back to a flaccid position on the bed, stared at the ceiling. "Don't be so good."

"What do you mean, you saw—?" Newt began.

"I wanted Thomas." Alby yelped, with a sudden burst of energy that Thomas would've thought impossible a few seconds earlier. "I didn't ask for you, Newt. Thomas I asked for, freakin' Thomas."

Newt looked up, questioned Thomas with a raising of his eyebrows. Thomas shrugged, feeling sicker by the second. What did Alby want *from* him?

"Fire, ya grumpy shack," Newt said. "He's right here—talk to him."

"Leave." Alby said, his eyes closed, his breathing heavy.

"No way—I wanna hear."

"Newt. A pause. "Leave. Now." Thomas felt incredibly awkward, worried about what Newt was thinking, and dreading what Alby wanted to say to him.

"But—" Newt protested.

"*Out!*" Alby sat up as he yelled, his voice cracking with the strain of it. He scooted himself back to lean against the headboard again. "Get out!"

Newt's face sank in obvious hurt. Thomas was surprised to see no anger there. Then, after a long, tense moment, Newt stood from his chair and walked over—the door opened as *He ready going to leave?* Thomas thought.

"Don't expect me to kiss your butt when you come sayin' sorry," he said, then stepped into the hallway.

"Close the door," Alby shouted, one final insult. Newt obeyed, slamming it shut.

Thomas's heart rate quickened—he was now alone with a

guy who'd had a bad temper *before* getting attacked by a Griever and going through the Changing. He hoped Aiby would say what he wanted and be done with it. A long pause stretched out, several minutes, and Thomas' hands shook with fear.

"I know who you are," Aiby said finally, breaking the silence.

Thomas couldn't find words as a reply. He tried, nothing came out but an incoherent mumble. He was utterly confused. And scared.

"I know who you are," Aiby repeated slowly. "Seen it. Seen everything. Where we came from, why you are. Who the girl is. I remember the Flare."

The Future Thomas forced himself to talk. "I don't know what you're talking about. What did you see? I'd love to know who I am."

"I am pretty," Aiby answered, and for the first time since Newt had left, Aiby looked up, straight at Thomas. His eyes were deep pockets of sorrow, sunken, dark. "It's torture, you know. Why would those shucks want us to remember? Why can't we just live here and be happy?"

"Aiby..." Thomas wished he could take a peek in the boy's mind, see what he'd seen. "The Changing," he pressed, "what happened? What came back? You're not making sense."

"You..." Aiby started, then suddenly grabbed his own throat, making gurgly choking sounds. His legs bucked out and he rolled onto his side, thrashing back and forth as if someone else were trying to strangle him. His tongue stuck out of his mouth; he bit it over and over again.

Thomas scoot up quickly, slumped backwards, horrified. Aiby struggled as if he was having a seizure, his legs kicking in every direction. The dark skin of his face, which had been oddly pale just a minute earlier, had turned purple; his eyes rolled up so far in their sockets they looked like glowing white marbles.

"Aiby!" Thomas yelled, not daring to reach down and grab him.

"Nwt!" he screamed cupping his hands around his mouth
"Nwt, get in here!"

The door was long open before he finished his last sentence
Nwt ran to Abby and grabbed him by the shoulders, pushing
him with his whole body to pin the already singing boy to the bed
"Grab his legs!"

Thomas moved forward but Abby's legs kicked and flailed
out making it impossible to get any closer. His foot hit
Thomas in the jaw a lance of pain shot through his whole
skull. He scrambled backwards again rubbing the sore spot.

"Just bloody well!" Nwt yelled.

Thomas could almost hear Nwt's toenails on top of Abby's body
grabbing his legs and pinning them to the bed. He wrapped
his arms around the boys legs and squeezed while Nwt put
a knee on one of Abby's shoulders, then grabbed at Abby's hands
struggling around his own neck in a strangling hold.

"Let go!" Nwt yelled as he ruggd. "You're bloody killing
yourself!"

Thomas could see the muscles in Nwt's arms flexing, veins
popping out as he pulled at Abby's hands. But finally seeing
metre by centimetre he was able to pry them away. He pushed
them right by again. He straggling boys chest. Abby's whole
body jerked a couple of times his mind went blanking up and
away from the bed. Then slowly he calmed and a few seconds
later he lay still. His breath evening, his eyes gazed over.

Thomas held firm to Abby's legs afraid to move and see the
boy off again. Nwt was still a minute before he slowly let go
of Abby's hands. Then another minute before he pulled his knee
back and stood up. Thomas took that as his cue to do the same
hoping the ordeal had truly ended.

Abby looked up, eyes a copy as if he was on the edge of
slipping into a deep sleep. "I'm sorry, Nwt," he whispered.
"Don't know what happened. It was like... something was
controlling my body. I'm sorry..."

Thomas took a deep breath. Sure he'd never experience

something so disturbing and uncomfortable again. He hoped.

"Sorry, nothin'," Newt replied "You were trying to bloody kill yourself."

"Wasn't me. I swear," Alby mumbled.

Newt threw his hands up. "What do you mean it wasn't you?" he asked.

"I don't know. It . . . it wasn't me." Alby looked just as confused as Thomas felt.

But Newt seemed to think it wasn't worth trying to figure out. At least at the moment. He grabbed the blankets that had fallen off the bed in Alby's struggle and pulled them atop the sick boy. "Get your butt to sleep and we'll talk about it later." He patted him on the head, then added, "You're messed up, shank."

But Alby was already drifting off, nodding sagely as his eyes closed.

Newt caught Thomas's gaze and gestured for the door. Thomas had no problem leaving that crazy house. He followed Newt out and into the hall. Then, just as they stepped through the doorway, Alby mumbled something from his bed.

Both boys stopped in their tracks. "What?" Newt asked.

Alby opened his eyes for a brief moment, then repeated what he'd said a little more loudly. "Be careful with the gr." Then his eyes slid shut.

There it was again—the gr. Somehow things always led back to the gr. Newt gave Thomas a questioning look, but Thomas could only return it with a shrug. He had no idea what was going on.

"Let's go," Newt whispered.

"And Newt?" Alby called again from the bed, not bothering to open his eyes.

"Yeah?"

"Protect the Maps." Alby rolled over, his back to the ground, then he'd finally finished speaking.

Thomas didn't think that sounded very good. Not good at all. He and Newt left the room and softly closed the door.

CHAPTER 28

Thomas followed Newt as he hurried down the stairs and out of the Homestead into the bright light of mid-afternoon. Neither boy said a word for a while. For Thomas, things just seemed to be getting worse and worse.

"Hungry, Tommy?" Newt asked when they were outside.

Thomas couldn't believe the question. "Hungry?" I feel like puking at what I just saw, and I'm not hungry.

Newt only grinned. "Well, I am, va shank. Let's go and look for some leftovers from lunch. We need to talk."

"So, somehow I knew you were going to say something like that." No matter what he did, he was becoming more and more entwined in the dealings of the Trade. And he was growing to expect it.

They made their way directly to the kitchen, where Asprick Frypan's grumbling, they were able to get cheese sandwiches and raw vegetables. Thomas couldn't ignore the way the keeper of the cooks kept giving him a weird look, eyes darting away whenever Thomas returned the stare.

Something told him this sort of treatment would now be the norm. For some reason, he was different from everyone else in the Glade. He felt like he'd lived an entire lifetime since awakening from his memory wipe, but he'd only been there a week.

The boys decided to take their lunches to eat outside, and a few minutes later they found themselves at the west wall, looking out at the many work activities going on throughout the Glade, their backs up against a spot of thick ivy. Thomas forced himself to eat the way things were going, he needed to make sure he'd have strength to deal with whatever insane thing came his way next.

"Ever seen that happen before?" Thomas asked after a minute or so.

Newt looked at him, his face suddenly somber. "What? A by just did? No. Never. But then again, no one's ever tried to tell us what they remembered during the Changing. They always refuse. A by tried to—must be why he went nuts for a while."

Thomas paused in the middle of chewing. Could the people behind the Maze control them somehow? It was a terrifying thought.

"We have to find Gally," Newt said through a bite of carrot, changing the subject. "Bugger's gone off and had somewhere. Soon as we're done eating, I need to find him and throw his butt in jail."

"Serious?" Thomas couldn't help feeling a shot of pure elation at the thought. He'd be happy to slam the door closed and throw away the key himself.

"That shank threatened to kill you and we have to make bloody sure it never happens again. That shank sure is gonna pay a heavy price for acting like that. He's lucky we don't banish him. Remember what I told you about order."

"Yeah." Thomas's only concern was that Gally would just hate him all the more for being thrown in jail. *I don't care.* He thought. *I'm not scared of that guy any more.*

"Here's how it'll pay out, Tommy," Newt said. "You're with

me the rest of today—we need to figure things out. Tomorrow the Summer. Then you're Minhos, and I want you to stay away from the other shanks for a while. Got it?"

Thomas was more than happy to oblige. Being mostly alone sounded like a great idea. "Sounds beautiful. So Minhos is going to train me?"

"That's right—you're a Runner now. Minho I teach ya. The Maze, the Maps, everything. Lots to learn. I expect you to work your butt off."

Thomas was shocked that the idea of entering the Maze again didn't frighten him as much. He resolved to do just as Newt said, hoping it would keep his mind off things. Deeper down, he hoped to get out of the city as much as possible. Avoiding other people was his new goal in life.

The boys sat in silence, finishing their lunches, until Newt finally got to what he tentatively wanted to talk about. "Cramping is fast into a box," he turned and looked straight at Thomas.

"Thomas," he began, "I need you to accept something. We've heard that many times now in court, and it's time to discuss it."

Thomas knew what was coming, but was startled. He dreaded the words.

"Gally said it. Alvy said it. Ben said it. Newt confirmed it," he said, after we took her out of the Box—she said it."

He paused, perhaps expecting Thomas to ask what he meant. But Thomas already knew. They all said things were going to change.

Newt looked away for a moment, then turned back. "That's right. And Gally, Alvy, and Ben claim they saw you in their memories after the Changing—and from what I gather, you were planting flowers and helping old ladies cross the street. According to Gally, there's something rotten enough about it, so that he wants to kill ya."

"Newt, I don't know—" Thomas started, but Newt didn't let him finish.

"I know you can't remember anything, Thomas. Just say it that - don't ever say it again. None of us remember anything, so I were bloody sick of you reminding us. The point is, there's something different about you, and it's time we figured it out."

Thomas was overwhelmed by a surge of anger. "Fine, so how do we do it? I want to know who I am just as much as anyone else, *Obviously*."

"I need you to open your mind. Be honest if anything anything at all seems familiar."

"Nothing." Thomas started, but stopped. So much had happened since arriving, he'd almost forgotten how far far the Glade had felt to him that first night, sleeping next to Chuck. How comfortable and *at home* he'd felt. A far cry from the terror he should've experienced.

"I can see your wheels spinning." Newt said quietly. "Talk."

Thomas hesitated, scared of the consequences of what he was about to say. But he was used of keeping secrets. "We I can't put my finger on anything specific." He spoke slowly, carefully. "But I did feel like I'd been here before when I first got here." He looked at Newt, hoping to see some sort of recognition in his eyes. "Anyone else go through that?"

But Newt's face was blank. He simply shook his eyes. "Uh, no, Lemony. Most of us spent a week blankin' our pants and bawlin' our eyes out."

"Yeah, well." Thomas paused, pale and suddenly embarrassed. What did it all mean? Was he different from everyone else somehow? Was something wrong with him? It all seemed familiar to me, and I knew I wanted to be a Runner."

"That's bloody interesting," Newt examined him for a second, not hiding his obvious suspicion. "Well, keep looking for it. Strain your mind, spend your free time wanderin' your thoughts and *think* about this place. Dive inside that brain of yours, and seek it out. Try, for all our sakes."

"I will." Thomas closed his eyes, started searching the darkness of his mind.

"Not now, you dumb shack." Newt laughed. "I just meant do it from now on. Free time, meals, go on to sleep at night as you walk around and work. Tell me anything that seems even remotely familiar. Got it?"

"Yeah, got it." Thomas couldn't help worrying that he'd thrown up some red flags for Newt, and that the older boy was just hiding his concern.

"Good that," Newt said, looking almost too agreeable. "To begin with, we'd better go and see someone."

"Who?" Thomas asked, not knowing he answered as soon as he spoke. Dread filled him again.

"The girl I want you to look at her too, your eyes have seen something gets triggered in that shack brain of yours." Newt gathered his lunch trash and stood up. "Then I want you to listen every single word Abby said to you."

Thomas sighed then got to his feet. "Okay." He didn't know if he could bring himself to tell the complete truth about Abby's accusations, not to mention how he felt about the girl. It looked like he wasn't done keeping secrets after all.

The boys walked back towards the Homestead where the girl still lay in a coma. Thomas couldn't shake his worry about what Newt was thinking. He'd ordered himself up, and he realized Newt, if Newt knew, not in now. Thomas didn't know if he could handle it.

"I'll take care of this," Newt said, interrupting Thomas's thoughts. "we'll set up a little conference, get everybody so you can go through the Charging. We need your memories."

Thomas barked a sarcastic laugh at the idea, but Newt wasn't smiling.

The girl seemed to be sleeping peacefully, like she'd wake up at any moment. Thomas had almost expected the skeletal remnant of a person, someone on the verge of death. But her chest rose and fell with even breaths, her skin was full of color.

One of the Med-jacks was here, the shorter one. Thomas

couldn't remember his name -dropping water into the coma
rose girl's mouth a few drips at a time. A plate and bowl on the
bedside table had the remains of her lunch - mashed potatoes
and soup. They were doing everything possible to keep her alive
and healthy.

"Hey, Clint," Newt said, sounding comfortable like he'd
stopped by to visit many times before. "She surviving?"

"Yeah," Clint answered. "She's doing fine - though she
talks to her sleep all the time. We think she'll come out of it
soon."

Thomas felt his hackles rise. For some reason, he'd never
really considered the possibility that the girl might wake up and
be okay. That she might talk to people. He had no idea why
that suddenly made him so nervous.

"Have you been writing down every word she says?" Newt
asked.

Clint nodded. "Most of it's impossible to understand. But
yeah, when we can."

Newt pointed at a notepad on the nightstand. "Give me an
example."

"We'll get the same thing she says when we pulled her out of
the Box, about things changing. Other stuff about the Creators
and how it all has to end. And, uh..." Clint looked at
Thomas as if he didn't want to continue in his company.

"It's okay - he can hear whatever I hear," Newt assured him.

"Well, ... I can't make it all out, but..." Clint looked at
Thomas again. "She keeps saying *his* name over and over."

Thomas almost fell down at this. Who are the references to
- he never ends! How did he know this girl - it was like a mad-
dening riddle at his skull - that wouldn't go away.

"Thanks, Clint," Newt said in what sounded to Thomas
like an obviously insincere "Get us a report of all that, okay?"

"Will do." The Med-jack nodded at both of them and left
the room.

"Pull up a chair," Newt said as he sat on the edge of the

seen Thomas, relieved that Newt still hadn't erupted into accusations, grabbed the one from the desk and placed it right next to where the girl's head lay. He sat down, leaning forward to look at her face.

"Anything ring a bell?" Newt asked. "Anything at all?"

Thomas didn't respond, kept looking, willing his mind to break down the memory barrier and seek out this girl from his past. He thought back to those brief moments when she'd opened her eyes right after being pulled out of the Black.

They'd been blue, richer in colour than the eyes of any other person he could remember seeing before. He tried to picture those eyes on her now as he looked at her stammering face, melding the two images in his mind. Her black hair, her perfect white skin, her full lips... as he stared at her, he realised once more how truly beautiful she was.

Stronger recollection briefly flicked the back of his mind - a flutter of wings in a dark corner, unseen but there all the same, it lasted only an instant before vanishing into the abyss of his other captured memories. But he had *felt* something.

"I do know her," he whispered, leaning back in his chair. He felt guilt to finally admit it out loud.

Newt stood up. "What? Who is she?"

"No idea. But something clicked. I know her from somewhere." Thomas rubbed his eyes, frustrated that he couldn't solidify the link.

"Well, keep busy, don't think, don't lose it. Concentrate."

"I'm trying, so shut up." Thomas closed his eyes, searched the darkness of his thoughts, seeking her face in that emptiness. *Who was she?* The irony of the question struck him - he didn't even know who *he* was.

He leaned forward in his chair and took a deep breath, then looked at Newt, shaking his head in surrender. "I just don't

Teresa

Thomas jolted up from the chair, knocked it backwards, spun in a circle, searching. He had heard

"What's wrong?" Newt asked. "Did ya remember something?"

Thomas ignored him, looked around the room in confusion, knowing he'd heard a voice then back at the girl.

"I—" He sat back down, leaned forward staring at the girl's face. "Newt, did you just say something here I stood up?"

"No."

Of course no. "Oh, I just thought I heard something. I don't know. Maybe it was in my head. Did she say anything?"

"Here?" Newt asked, his eyes lit up. "No. Why? What did you hear?"

Thomas was scared to admit it. "I—I swear I heard a name, Teresa."

"Teresa? No, I didn't hear that. Must've sprung loose from your bloody memory blocks. That's her name, isn't it? Teresa. Has to be."

Thomas felt a cold, an uncomfortable feeling, like something supernatural had just occurred. "It was—I swear I heard it. But in my mind, man. I can't explain it."

Thomas,

This time he jumped from the chair and scrambled as far from the bed as possible, knocking over the lamp on the table, it landed with the crash of broken glass. A voice. A girl's voice. Whispers, sweet, confident. He'd heard it. He *knew* he'd heard it.

"What's bloody wrong with you?" Newt asked.

Thomas's heart was racing. He felt the thumps of his skull. And bowed in his stomach. "She's—she's freakin' *talking* to me. In my head. She just said my name!"

"What?"

"I swear!" The world spun around him, pressed to crushing his mind. "I'm—hearing her voice in my head. Or something. It's not really a voice..."

Tommy sat your butt down. What are you bloody talking about?"

"Newt. I'm serious. It's not really a voice but it is."
Tom, were the last ones. I can make it this time.

The words echoed in his mind, touched his eardrums. He could hear them. Yet they didn't sound like they were coming from the room, from outside his body. They were coming in every way, inside his mind.

Tom, don't freak out on me

He put his hands up to his ears, squeezed his eyes shut. It was odd, strange, he couldn't bring his rational mind to accept what was happening.

My memory's fading already, Tom. I won't remember much when I wake up. We can pass the Trial. It has to end. They sent me as a trigger.

Thomas couldn't take it any more. Ignoring Newt's questions, he stumbled to the door and yanked it open, stepped into the hall, ran. Down the stairs, out the front door, he ran that it did nothing to shut her up.

Everything is going to change, she said

He wanted to scream, run and, he could run no more. He made it to the East Door and sprinted through it, out of the Glade. Kept going through corridor after corridor, deep into the heart of the Maze, rules or no rules. But he still couldn't escape the voice.

It was you and me, Tom. We did this to them, to us.

CHAPTER 29

Thomas didn't stop until the voice had gone for good. It shocked him when he realised he'd been running for almost an hour - the shadows of the walls ran long towards the east, and soon the sun would set, for the night and the Doors would close. He had to get back. It only peripherally hit him then that without thinking he'd recognised the direction and the time. That his instincts were strong.

He had to get back.

But he didn't know if he could face her again. The voice in his head. The strange things she'd said.

He had no choice. Denying the truth would solve nothing. And as bad - as weird - as the invasion of his mind had been, it beat anything he'd date with the thieves any day.

As he ran towards the Gate, he learned a lot about himself. Without meaning to or realising it, he'd pictured in his mind his exact route through the Maze as he escaped the voice. Not once did he falter on his return, turning left and right and running down long corridors in reverse of the way he had come.

He knew what it meant.

Ment had been right. Soon, Thomas would be the best Runner.

The second thing he learned about himself as if the night in the Maze hadn't proved it already, was that his body was in perfect shape. Just a day earlier he'd been at the end of his strength and sore from a painful fall. He'd recovered quickly and ran now with almost no effort, despite nearing the end of his second hour of running. It didn't take a maths genius to calculate that his speed and time combined meant he'd run to 100 miles in a marathon by the time he returned to the Glade.

Never before had the sheer size of the Maze truly hit him. Miles and miles and miles. With its walls that moved every night, he finally understood why the Maze was so hard to solve. He'd doubted it until now, wondered how the Runners could be so inept.

On he ran, left and right, straight on and on. By the time he'd crossed the threshold into the Glade, the Doors were only minutes away from closing for the night. Exhausted, he headed straight for the Deatheads, went deep into the forest and he reached the spot where the trees crowded against the south-west corner. More than anything, he wanted to be alone.

When he could hear only the sounds of distant Glader conversations, as well as faint echoes of bleating sheep and snorting pigs, his wish was granted: he found the junction of the two giant walls and collapsed into the corner to rest. No one came, no one bothered him. The south wall eventually moved, closing for the night, he leaned forward and he stopped. Minutes later his back once again comfortably pressed against its layers of dry, brittle leaves.

The next morning, someone gently shook him awake.

"Thomas, wake up." It was Chuck. The kid seemed to be able to find him anywhere.

Grumbling, Thomas leaned forward and stretched out his back.

and arms. A couple of blankets had been placed over him during the night – someone playing the Good Mother.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"You're almost too late for breakfast." Chuck tugged on his arm. "Come on, get up. You need to start acting normal or things will just get worse."

The events of the previous day came crashing into Thomas's mind, and his stomach seemed to twist inside out. *What are they going to do to me?* he thought. *Those things he said. Something about me and her doing this to them. To us. What did that mean?*

Then it hit him that maybe he was crazy. Maybe the stress of the Maze had driven him insane. Either way, only he had heard the voice inside his head. No one else knew the weird things Teresa had said, or accused him of. They didn't even know that she had told him her name. Well, no one except Newt.

And he would keep it that way. Things were bad enough on way he'd make it worse by telling people about voices in his head. The only problem was Newt. Thomas would have to convince him somehow that stress had finally overwhelmed him and a good night's rest had solved everything. *I'm not crazy.* Thomas told himself. Surely he wasn't.

Chuck was looking up at him with eyebrows raised.

"Sorry," Thomas said as he stood up, acting as normal as he could. "Just thinking. Let's eat. I'm starving."

"Good that." Chuck said, slapping Thomas on the back.

They headed for the Homestead. Chuck sipping the whole time. Thomas wasn't complaining – it was the closest thing to normal in his life.

"Newt found you last night and told everyone to let you sleep. And he told us what the Council decided about you. One day in the cell then you'll enter the Runner training programme. Some shanks grumbled, some cheered, most acted like they couldn't care less. As for me, I think it's pretty

awesome." Chu paused to take a breath, then kept going. "That first night when you were bragging about being a Runner and all that shuck-shuck if I was a fighting inside so hard I kept telling myself this sucker's it for a rude awakening. Well, you proved me wrong, huh?"

But Thomas didn't feel like talking about it. "I just did what anyone else would've done. It's not my fault. Minho and Newt want me to be a Runner."

"Yeah, right. Just being modest."

Being a Runner was the last thing on Thomas's mind. What he couldn't stop thinking about was Teresa—the voice in his head, what she'd said. I guess I'm a little excited. Thomas forced a grin, though he cringed at the thought of hanging out in the Sunneter by himself all day before he got to start.

"Well, I see how you feel after running your guts out. Anyways, as long as you know old Chuck is proud of you."

Thomas smiled at his friend's enthusiasm. "If only you were my name." It was his mother's great "fired be a peach." *My mom*—he thought. The word seemed to darken for a moment. He couldn't even remember his own mother. He pushed the thought away before it consumed him.

They made it to the kitchen and grabbed a quick breakfast, taking two empty seats at the long table inside. Every Gader going in and out the door gave Thomas a stare, a few came up and offered congratulations. Other than a sprinkling of dirty looks here and there, most people seemed to be on his side. Then he remembered Gally.

"Hey, Chuck," he asked after taking a bite of eggs, trying to sound casual. "Did they ever find Gally?"

"No. I was gonna tell you—someone said they saw him run out into the Maze after he left the Gathering. Hasn't been seen since."

Thomas dropped his fork, not knowing what he'd expected or hoped for. Either way, the news stunned him. "What? You're serious? He went into the Maze?"

"Yeah. Everyone knows he went nuts - some shank even accused you of killing him when you ran out there yesterday."

"I can't believe..." Thomas stared at his plate, trying to understand why Gally would do that.

"Don't worry about it, dude. No one liked him except for his few stuck cronies. They're the ones accusing you of stuff."

Thomas couldn't believe how casually Chuck spoke about it. "Ya know the guy is probably dead. You're talking about him like he's gone on holiday."

A contemplative look came over Chuck. "I don't think he's dead."

"Huh? Then where is he? Aren't Manho and I the only ones who've survived a night out there?"

"That's what I'm saying. I think his buddies are hiding him inside the Castle somewhere. Gally was an idiot, but he couldn't possibly be stupid enough to stay out in the Maze all night. Like you."

Thomas shook his head. "Maybe that's *exactly* why he stayed out there. Wanted to prove he could do anything I can do. The guy hates me." A pause. "Hated me."

"Well, whatever." Chuck shrugged as if they were arguing over what to have for breakfast. "If he's dead, you guys'll probably find him eventually. If not, he'll get hungry and show up to eat. I don't care."

Thomas picked up his plate and looked to the counter. "Alright. I want a normal day - one day to relax."

"Then your nobody wish is granted," said a voice from the kitchen door behind him.

Thomas turned to see Newt there, smiling. That grin sent a wave of reassurance through Thomas as if he were finding out the world was okay again.

"Come on, ya buggin' a lbert." Newt said. "You can take it easy while you're hangin' in the Summer. Let's go. Chucky'll bring ya some lunch at noon."

Thomas nodded and headed out the door, Newt leading the

way. Suddenly a day in prison sounded excellent. A day to just sit and relax.

Though something told him there was a better chance of Gally bringing him flowers than of passing a day in the Guard with nothing strange happening.

CHAPTER 30

The Slammer stood in an obscure place between the Homestead and the north Glade wall, hidden behind thorny, ragged bushes that looked like they hadn't been trimmed in ages. It was a big block of roughly cut concrete, with one tiny, barred window and a wooden door that was locked with a menacing rusty metal latch, like something out of the Dark Ages.

Newt took out a key and opened it up, then motioned for Thomas to enter. "There's only a chair in there and nothing at all for ya to do. Enjoy yourself."

Thomas groaned inwardly as he stepped inside and saw the one piece of furniture—an ugly, rickety chair with one leg obviously shorter than the rest, probably on purpose. Didn't even have a cushion.

"Have fun," Newt said before closing the door. Thomas turned back to his new home and heard the latch close and the lock click behind him. Newt's head appeared at the little glassless window, looking through the bars, a smirk on his face.

"Nice reward for breaking the rules. You saved some lives. Tommy ya ya still need to learn."

"Yeah, I know. *Order*."

Newt smiled. "You're not a f---in' bad shank. But friends of ours gotta run things properly, keep us buggers alive. Think about that while ya sit here and stare at the blood walls."

And then he was gone.

The first hour passed, and Thomas let boredom creep in like rats under the door. By hour number two, he wanted to bang his head against the wall. Two hours after that he started to think having dinner with Gary and the Carters would be sitting inside that stupid Hammer. He sat and tried to bring back memories, but every effort evaporated into oblivion as mist before anything formed.

Thankfully, Chuck arrived with lunch at noon, relieving Thomas from his thoughts.

After passing some pieces of chicken and a glass of water through the window, he took up his usual role of taking Thomas's car off.

"Everything's getting back to normal," the boy announced. "The Runners are out in the Maze, everyone's working, maybe we'll survive a while. Still no sign of Gary." Newt told the Runners to call back, let's skip the spookery. If they found his body, And oh yeah... Ah, he's up and around. See us fine, and Newt's glad he doesn't have to be the big boss anymore."

The mention of Ah by p---ed Thomas's attention from his food. He peered at the older boy, brassing around, chucking himself the day before. Thomas remembered that he alone else knew what Ah had said after Newt left the room, before the seizure. But that didn't mean Ah was a keeper between them now that he was up and walking around.

Chuck continued talking, taking a completely unexpected turn. "Thomas, I'm kinda messed up man. It's weird to feel sad and homesick, but I have no idea what it is you wish you could

go back to, ya know? A... I know is I don't want to be here. I want to go back to my family. Whatever's there, whatever I was taken from, I wanna remember."

Thomas was a little surprised. He'd never heard Chuck say something so deep and so true. "I know what you mean," he murmured.

Chuck was too short for his eyes to reach where Thomas could see them as he spoke, but from his next statement, Thomas imagined them filling with a bleak sadness, maybe even tears. "I used to cry. Every night."

This made thoughts of Abby leave Thomas's mind. "Yeah?"

"Like a pants-wetted baby. Almost till the day you got here. Then I just got used to it, I guess. This became home, even though we spend every day hoping to get out."

"I've only cried once since I got here, but that was after almost getting eaten alive. I'm probably just a shadow, shuck-face." Thomas might not have admitted it if Chuck hadn't opened up.

"You cried?" he heard Chuck say through the window. "Then?"

"Yeah. When the last one finally fell over the cliff, I broke down and sobbed till my throat and chest hurt." Thomas remembered all too well. "Everything crushed in on me at once. Sure made *me* feel better. Don't feel bad about crying. Ever."

"K'nna *does* make ya feel better, huh? Weird how that works."

A few minutes passed in silence. Thomas found himself hoping Chuck wouldn't leave.

"Hey, Thomas?" Chuck asked.

"Still here."

"Do you think I have parents? *Real* parents?"

Thomas laughed, mostly to push away the sudden surge of sadness the statement caused. "Of course you do, shank. You need me to explain the birds and bees?" Thomas's heart hurt.

he could remember getting that lecture but not who'd given it to him.

"That's not what I meant," Chuck said, his voice completely devoid of cheer. It was low and bleak, almost a mumble. "Most of the guys who've gone through the Chicago gang remember terrible things they won't even talk about, which makes me doubt I have anything good back home. So I mean, you think it's really possible I have a mom and a dad out in the world somewhere missing me? Do you think *they* cry at night?"

Thomas was completely shocked to realize his eyes had filled with tears. It had been so crazy since he'd arrived, he'd never really thought of the Leaders as real people with real families missing them. It was strange, but he hadn't even really thought of a case that way. Only about what it all meant, who sent them there, how they'd ever gotten there.

For the first time, he felt something for Chuck that made him so angry he wanted to kill somebody. The boy should be in school, in a home, playing with neighborhood kids. He deserved to go home at night to a family who loved him, worried about him. A mom who made him take a shower every day and a dad who helped him with homework.

Thomas hated the people who'd taken this poor, innocent kid from his family. He'd a crush on them with a passion he didn't know a human could feel. He wanted them dead, tortured even. He was all Chuck's to be happy.

But happiness had been ripped from their lives, some had been ripped from their lives.

"Listen to me, Chuck," Thomas paused, calming down as much as he could, making sure his voice didn't crack. "I'm sure you have parents. I know it sounds terrible, but I bet your mom is sitting in your room right now, holding your pillow, looking out at the world that stole you from her. And yeah, I bet she's crying. Hard. But even she is *not* crying. The real deal."

Chuck didn't say anything, but Thomas thought he heard the slightest of snuffles.

"Don't give up, Chuck. We're gonna solve this thing, get out of here. I'm a Runner now. I promise on my life I'll get you back to that room of yours. Make you run, just crying. And Thomas meant it. He felt it *burn* in his heart.

"Hope you're right," Chuck said with a shaky voice. He made a Thomas-up sign in the window, then walked away.

Thomas stood up to pace around the little room, flaming with an intense desire to keep his promise. "I swear, Chuck," he whispered to no one. "I swear I'll get you back soon."

CHAPTER 31

Just after Thomas heard the grind and rumble of stone against stone announce the closing of the Doors for the day, Abby showed up to release him, which was a huge surprise. The metal of key and lock creaked, then the door to the cell swung wide open.

"Ain't dead are ya, shank." Abby asked. He looked so much better than the day he was. Thomas couldn't help staring at him. His skin was back to its colour, his eyes no longer criss-crossed with red veins, he seemed to have gained a stone in twenty-four hours.

Abby winked, him giggling. "Shuck it, boy, what you lookin' at?"

Thomas shook his head slightly, feeling like he'd been in a trance. His mind was racing, wondering what Abby remembered, what he knew, what he might say about him. "What?" Nothing just seems crazy you heard so quickly. You're fine now."

Abby flexed his right bicep. "Never been better. Come on out."

Thomas did, hoping his eyes weren't flickering, making his concern obvious.

Alby closed the Summer door and locked it, then turned to face him. "Actually, nothin' but a lie. I see like a piece of junk twice crapped by a Greener."

"Yeah, you looked it yesterday." When Alby glared, Thomas hoped it was interest and quickly clarified. "But today you look brand-new. I swear."

Alby put the keys in his pocket and leaned back against the Summer's door. "So, quite a little talk we had yesterday."

Thomas's heart pounded. He had no idea what to expect from Alby at that point. "Uh... yeah, I remember."

"I saw what I saw. Greenie. It's kinda bad, but I ain't never gonna forget. It was terrible. Tried to talk about it, somethin' starts choking me. Now the images are gettin' up aidge to me like that same somethin' I can't like me rememberin'."

The scene from the day before flashed in Thomas's mind. Alby thrashing, trying to strangle himself. Thomas wouldn't have believed it had happened if he hadn't seen it himself. Despite hearing an answer, he knew he had to ask the next question. "What was it about me? You kept saying you saw me. What was I doing?"

Alby stared at an empty space in the distance for a while before answering. "You were with the... Creators. Helpin' them. But that's what got me shook up."

Thomas felt like someone had just rammed their fist into his abdomen. *Helping them?* He couldn't form the words to ask what that meant.

Alby continued. "I hope the Creators doesn't give us real memories. That plants fake ones. Some suspect it. I can only hope. If the world's the way I saw it, the Creators off leavin' an ominous silence."

Thomas was confused, but pressed on. "Can you tell me what you saw about me?"

Alby shook his head. "No way, shank. Ain't gonna risk

stranger to myself again. Might be something they put in our brains to control us – just like the memory wipe.”

“Well if I’m evil, maybe you should leave me locked up.” Thomas half meant it.

“Greenie, you ain’t evil. You might be a shack faced saint head, but you ain’t evil.” Abby showed the slightest hint of a smile, a bare crack in his usually hard face. “What you did risked your butt to save me and Minho – that ain’t no evil I’ve ever heard of. Nat just makes me think the Crut Serum and the Changing got something fishy about ‘em. For your sake and mine, I hope so.”

Thomas was so relieved that Abby thought he was okay, he only heard about half of what the older boy had just said. “How bad was it? Your memories that came back?”

I remembered things from growing up where I lived, that sort of stuff. And I could be sure I came down right now and told me I could go back home. “Abby looked to the ground and shook his head again. “It was real. I swear. I swear I’d go and smack up with the Crutlers before going back.”

Thomas was surprised to hear it was so bad. He wished Abby would give details, describe something, anything. But he knew the choking was still too fresh in Abby’s mind for him to blurt. “Well, maybe they’re not real. Abby. Maybe the Crut Serum is some kind of psycho drug that gives you hallucinations.” Thomas knew he was grasping at straws.

Abby thought for a minute. “A drug? Hallucinations?” Then he shook his head. “No, no.”

“I had one word, a try. We could have to escape this place.”

“Yeah, thanks, Greenie.” Abby said sarcastically. “Do you know what we could do without your pep talks? Again, the answer is no.”

Abby’s change of mood broke Thomas out of his gloom. “Quit acting like Greenie. He got the Crut Serum now.”

“Okay, Greenie.” Abby sighed, clearly done with the conversation. “I can find some other – you + terrible prison sentence of *one day* is over.”

"One was plenty." Despite wanting answers, Thomas was ready to get away from the Summer Place he was staying. He grinned at Abby. Then headed straight for the kitchen and food.

Dinner was awesome,

Erypan had known Thomas would be coming here, so he'd set a plate full of roast beef and potatoes, a note announced there were cookies in the cupboard. The Cook seemed fully intent on backing up the support he'd shown for Thomas in the Carrieting. Minho joined Thomas as he ate, prepping him a little before his first big day of Runner training, giving him a few seats and interesting facts. Things for him to think about as he went to sleep that night.

When they were finished, Thomas headed back to the secluded place where he'd slept the night before, in the corner behind the Deadheads. He thought about his conversation with Erypan, wondered how it would feel to have parents say goodnight to you.

Seven boys in bed about the time that night, so for the most part it was quiet, like everyone was wanted to go to sleep, end the day and be done with it. Thomas didn't complain - that was exactly what he needed.

The blankets someone had left for him in the night before stayed there. He picked them up and settled in, snuggling up against the comforting corner where the stone was smooth, in a mass of soft wool. The mixed smells of the forest greeted him as he took his first deep breath, trying to relax. The air felt perfect and it made him wonder again about the weather of the place. Never rained, never snowed, never got too hot or too cold, it was perfect for the true fact, they were torn apart from friends and families and trapped in a Maze with a bunch of monsters. It could be paradise.

Some things here were too perfect. He knew that but had no explanation.

His thoughts drifted to what Minho had said him and other

about the size and scale of the Maze. He believed it had realised the massive scale when he'd been to the Cliff. But he just couldn't fathom how such a structure could have been built. The Maze stretched for miles and miles. The Runners had to be in almost superhuman shape to do what they did every day.

And yet they'd *never* found an exit. And despite that, despite the utter hopelessness of the situation, they still hadn't given up.

At dinner Minho had told him an old story – one of the bizarre and random things he remembered from before – about a woman trapped in a maze. She escaped by never taking her right hand off the walls of the maze, sliding it along as she walked. In doing so, she was forced to turn right at every turn, and the simple laws of physics and geometry ensured that eventually she found the exit. It made sense.

But not here. Here, all paths led back to the Glade. They had to be missing *something*.

Tomorrow, his training would begin. Tomorrow he would start helping them find that missing something. Right then, Thomas made a decision. Forget all the weird stuff. Forget all the bad things. Forget it all. He wouldn't quit until he'd solved the puzzle and found a way home.

Tomorrow. The word thrived in his mind until he finally fell asleep.

CHAPTER 32

Minho woke Thomas before dawn, rationing with a pinch to follow him back to the Homeshead. Thomas easily shook off his morning grogginess, excited to begin his training. He crawled out from under his blanket and eagerly followed his teacher winding his way through the crowd of Gladers who slept on the lawn, their smiles the only sign they weren't dead. The slightest glow of early morning illuminated the Glade, turning everything dark blue and black with. Thomas had never seen the place look so peaceful. A cock crowed in the Blood House.

Finally, in a crooked crawlspace near a back corner of the Homeshead, Minho pried out a key and opened up a shabby door leading to a small storage cupboard. Thomas, in a sliver of anticipation, wondering what was inside. He caught glimpses of ropes and chains and other odds and ends as Minho's torch was passed, he continued. Eventually, it fell on an open box full of running shoes. Thomas almost laughed. It seemed so ordinary.

"That's right, there's the hammer one supply we get," Mirho announced. "At least for us. They send new ones in the Box every so often. If we had had shoes, we'd have feet that look like freakin' Mars." He bent over and rummaged through the pile. "What size you wear?"

"Size?" Thomas thought for a second. "I don't know." It was so odd sometimes what he could and couldn't remember. He reached down and prised off one of the shoes he'd worn since coming to the Glade and took a peek inside. "Eleven."

"Geez, shank ya a got big feet," Mirho stood up holding a pair of sleek silver ones. "But looks like I've got some—man, we could go canoeing in these things."

"Those are fancy," Thomas took them and walked out of the cupboard to sit on the ground eager to try them on. Mirho grabbed a few more things before coming out to join him.

"Only Runners and Keepers get these," Mirho said. Before Thomas could look up at him trying his shoes, a plastic wristwatch dropped into his lap. It was black and very simple, its face showing only a digital display of the time. "Put it on and never take it off. Your life might depend on it."

Thomas was glad to have it. The night the sun and the shadows had seemed plenty to let him know roughly what time it was up to that point, being a Runner probably required more precision. He buckled the watch onto his wrist and then returned to fitting on his shoes.

Mirho continued talking. "Here's a rucksack, water bottle, a toothbrush, some shorts and T-shirts, a hot stool." He nudged Thomas who looked up. Mirho was holding out a couple of pairs of tight-fitting underwear made from a shiny white material. "These bad boys're what we call Runner undies. Keeps you warm and comfy."

"Nice and comfy?"

"Yeah, ya know. Your—"

Looking at the Thomas took the underwear and other stuff. "You're already have this stuff though. I don't want."

"Couple of years running your butt off every day, you figure out what you need and ask for it." He started stuffing things into his own rucksack.

Thomas was surprised. "You mean you can make requests? Supplies you want?" Why would the people who'd sent them there help so much?

"Of course we can. Just drop a note in the Box and there she goes. Doesn't mean we always get what we want from the Creators. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't."

"Ever asked for a map?"

Minho laughed. "Yeah, tried that one. Asked for a TV, too, but no luck. I guess those stick-faces don't want us seeing how wonderful life is when you don't live in a freaking maze."

Thomas felt a trickle of doubt that life was so great back home—what kind of world allowed people to make hands like these? The thought surprised him as this source had been founded in actual memory, a wisp of light in the darkness of his mind. But it was already gone. Shaking his head, he finished lacing up his shoes, then stood up and jogged around in circles, jumping up and down to test them out. "They feel pretty good. I guess I'm ready."

Minho was still crouched over his rucksack on the ground. He glanced up at Thomas with a note of disgust. "You look like an idiot prancing around like a shackled animal. Good luck out there with no breakfast, no packed lunch, no weapons."

Thomas had already stopped moving, feet an inch off the ground. "Weapons?"

"Weapons." Minho stood and walked back to the cupboard. "Come here, I'll show ya."

Thomas followed Minho into the spiral room and watched as he pulled a few boxes away from the back wall. Underneath lay a small trapdoor. Minho lifted it to reveal a set of wooden stairs leading into blackness. "Keep'em down in the basement so shanks like Gally can't get to them. Come on."

Minho went first. The stairs creaked with every shift of

weight as they descended the dozen or so steps. The cool air was refreshing, despite the dust and the strong scent of mildew. They hit a dirt floor, and Thomas couldn't see a thing and. Minho turned on a single light bulb by pulling a string.

The room was larger than Thomas had expected, at least ten square metres. Shelves lined the walls and there were several blocky wooden tables; everything in sight was covered with all manner of junk that gave him the creeps. Wooden poles, metal spikes, large pieces of mesh like what covers a chicken coop, rolls of barbed wire, saws, knives, swords. One entire wall was dedicated to archery: wooden bows, arrows, spare strings. The sight of it immediately brought back the memory of Ben getting shot by Alby in the Deadheads.

"Wow," Thomas murmured, his voice a dull thump in the enclosed place. At first he was terrified that they needed so many weapons, but he was relieved to see that the vast majority of it was covered with a thick layer of dust.

"Dust is the most of it," Minho said. "But ya never know. All we usually take with us is a couple of sharp knives."

He nodded towards a large wooden trunk in the corner, its top open and leaning against the wall. Knives of all shapes and sizes were stacked haphazardly all the way to the top.

Thomas just hoped the room was kept secret from most of the Gleaders. "Seems kind of dangerous to have all this stuff," he said. "What if Ben had got down here right before he went nuts and attacked me?"

Minho pulled the keys out of his pocket and dangled them with a cocky smirk. "Only a few lucky roads have a set of these."

"So I can?"

"Quit your belly-aching and pick a couple. Make sure they're nice and sharp. Then we'll go and get breakfast and pack our stuff. I wanna spend some time in the Map Room before we head out."

Thomas was surprised to hear that he'd been curious about

the squat building ever since he'd first seen a Runner go through its menacing door. He selected a short sassy dagger with a rubber grip, then one with a long black blade. His excitement waned a little. Even though he knew perfectly well what was out there, he still didn't want to think about why he needed weapons to go into the Maze.

Half an hour later, fed and packed, they stood in front of the riveted metal door of the Map Room. Thomas was itching to go inside. Dawn had burst forth in all her glory, and Graders milled about, readying for the day. Some sat, fryng bacon waited through the air. Frypan and his crew trying to keep up with dozens of starving stomachs. Minho unlocked the door, cranked the wheel handle, spinning it until a audible click sounded from inside, then pulled. With a carching squeal, the heavy metal slab swung open.

"After you," Minho said with a mocking bow.

Thomas went in without saying anything. A cool fear mixed with an intense curiosity gripped him, and he had to remind himself to breathe.

The dark room had a musty, wet smell, laced with a deep coppery scent so strong he could taste it. A distant, faded memory of sucking on pennies as a kid popped into his head.

Minho hit a switch and several rows of fluorescent lights flickered until they came on full strength, revealing the room in detail.

Thomas was surprised at its simplicity. About six metres across, the Map Room had concrete walls bare of any decoration. A wooden table stood in the exact centre, eight chairs tucked in around it. Neatly stacked piles of paper and pencils lay about the table's surface, one for each chair. The only other items in the room were eight trunks, just like the one containing the knives in the weapons basement. Closed, they were evenly spaced, two to a wall.

"Welcome to the Map Room," Minho said. "As happy a place as you could ever visit."

Thomas was slightly disappointed. He had been expecting something more profound. He took a deep breath. "Too bad time is like a abandoned copper mine."

I kinda like the smell. Minho pulled out two chairs and sat in one of them. "Have a seat. I want you to get a couple of images in your head before we go out there."

As Thomas sat down, Minho grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil and started drawing. Thomas leaned in to get a better look and saw that Minho had drawn a big box that filled almost the entire page. Then he filled it with smaller boxes until it looked exactly like an enclosed nights and crosses board. Three rows of three squares, all the same size. He wrote the word *GLADE* in the middle. Then numbered the outside squares from one to eight, starting in the upper left corner and going clockwise. Lastly, he drew little notches here and there.

"These are the Doors," Minho said. "You know all of the ones from the Glade, but there are four more out in the Maze that lead to Sectors One, Three, Five and Seven. They stay in the same spot, but the route there changes with the wall movements every night." He finished, then slid the paper over to rest in front of Thomas.

Thomas picked it up, completely fascinated. The Maze was so surreal and studied, it was Minho kept asking.

"So we have the Maze surrounded by eight Sectors, each one a completely self-contained square and unsolvable in the two years since we began this freaky game. The only thing even approaching an exit is the Cell, and that's not a very good one unless you like facing a horrible death." Minho tapped the Map. "The walls move all over the stuck place every evening, sometimes as our Doors close shut. At least we know that's when, because we never really hear walls moving any other time."

Thomas looked up, happy to be able to offer a piece of information. "I didn't see anything move that night we got stuck out there."

"Those main corridors right outside the Doors don't ever change. It's just the ones a little deeper in."

"Oh." Thomas returned to the crude map, trying to visualize the Maze and see stone walls where Minho had penciled lines.

"We always have at least eight Runners, including the Keeper. One for each Section. It takes us a whole day to map out our area—hoping against hope there's an exit—then we come back and draw it up, a separate page for each day." Minho glanced over at one of the trunks. "That's why those things are stunk full of Maps."

Thomas had a depressing and scary thought. "Am I replacing someone? Did somebody get killed?"

Minho shook his head. "No, we're just training you—someone I probably want a break. Don't worry, it's been a while since a Runner was killed."

For some reason that last statement worried Thomas, though he hoped it didn't show on his face. He pointed at Section Three. "So—it takes you a whole day to run through these little squares?"

"Harsh." Minho stood and stepped over to the trunk right behind them, knelt down, retrieved the lid and rested it against the wall. "Come here."

Thomas had already got up; he leaned over Minho's shoulder and took a look. The trunk was large enough that a few stacks of Maps could fit in it, and four reached the top. Each of the ones Thomas could see were very similar: a rough sketch of a square maze filling almost the whole page. In the top right corners, *Section 8* was scribbled, followed by the name *Hank*. Then the word *Day*, followed by a number. The latest one said it was day number 749.

Minho continued. "We figured out the walls were moving right at the beginning. As soon as we did, we started keeping track. We've always thought that comparing these day-to-day, week-to-week, would help us figure out a pattern. And we did

the mazes basically repeat themselves about every month. But we've yet to see an exit open up that will lead us out of the square. Never been an exit."

"It's been two years," Thomas said. "Haven't you got desperate enough to stay out there overnight, see if maybe something opens while the walls are moving?"

Miho looked up at him, a flash of anger in his eyes. "That's kind of insulting, dude. Seriously."

"What?" Thomas was shocked. "He hadn't meant it that way."

"We've been stuck out here for two years, and all you can ask is why we're too pussy to stay out here all night. A few died in the very beginning. All of them turned up dead. You wanna spend another night out here? Like your chances of surviving again, do ya?"

Thomas's face reddened in shame. "No. Sorry." He suddenly felt like a piece of kumik. And he certainly agreed. He'd much rather come home safe and sound to the Glade every night than ensure another battle with the Griefers. He shuddered at the thought.

"Yeah, well," Miho returned his gaze to the Maps in the trunk, much to Thomas's relief. "Life in the Glade might not be sweet life, but at least it's safe. Plenty of food, protection from the Griefers. There's no way we can ask the Runners to risk staying out there, no way. Least not yet. No one's talking about these patterns giving a clue that an exit might open up, even temporarily."

"Are you close. Anything developing?"

Miho shrugged. "I don't know. It's kind of depressing, but we don't know what else to do. Can't take a chance that one day in the spot somewhere an exit might appear. We can't give up. Ever."

Thomas nodded, relieved at the attitude. As bad as things were, giving up would only make them worse.

Miho pulled several sheets from the trunk, the Maps from

the last few days. As he flipped through them, he explained. "We compare day to day, week to week, month to month. Just like I was saying. Each Runner is in charge of the Map for his own Section. If I gotta be honest, we haven't figured out jack yet. Even more honest - we don't know what we're looking for. Really sucks, dude. Really freaking sucks."

"But we can't give up." Thomas said it in a matter-of-fact tone, as a resigned repetition of what Minho had said a moment earlier. He'd said "we" without even thinking about it, and realized he was truly part of the Gade now.

"Right on, bro. We can't give up." Minho carefully returned the papers and closed the trunk, then stood. "Well, we gotta just wait 'till since we took our time in here - you'll just be following me around for your first few days. Ready?"

Thomas felt a wire of nervousness tighten inside him, pinching his gut. It was actually here - they were going for real now, no more talking and thinking about it. "Um... yeah."

"No ums' around here. You ready or not?"

Thomas looked at Minho, matched his suddenly hard gaze. "I'm ready."

"Then let's go runnin'."

CHAPTER 33

They went through the West door in a Section Eight and made their way down several corridors. Thomas right beside Milo as he turned right and left without seeming to think about it, running all the while. The early morning light had a sharp sheen about it, making everything look bright and crisp—the ivy, the cracked walls, the stone blocks of the ground. Though the sun had a few hours before hitting the noon spot up above, there was plenty of light to see by. Thomas kept up with Milo as easily as he could, having to sprint every once in a while to catch back up.

They finally made it to a rectangular cut in a long wall to the north which looked like a doorway with at a door. Minho ran straight through it without stopping. “This leads to a Section Eight—the middle left square—to Section One—the top left square. Like I said, this passage is always in the same spot, but we are here might be a little different because of the walls rearranging themselves.”

Thomas followed him, surprised at how heavy his breaths

had already become. He hoped it was only jitters that his breathing would steady soon.

They ran down a long corridor to the right, passing several turns to the left. When they reached the end of the passage, Minho slowed to barely more than a walk and reached behind him to pull out a notepad and pencil from a side pocket in his rucksack. He jotted a note, then put them back, never fully stopping. Thomas wondered what he'd written, but Minho answered him before he could pose the question.

"I rely mostly on memory," the Keeper huffed, his voice finally showing a hint of strain. "But about every fifth turn, I write something down to help me later. Mostly just related stuff from yesterday - what's different today. Then I can use yesterday's Map to make today's. Easy-peasy, dude."

Thomas was intrigued. Minho *did* make it sound easy.

They ran for a short while before they reached an intersection. They had three possible choices, but Minho went to the right without hesitating. As he did so, he pulled one of his knives from a pocket and, without missing a beat, cut a big piece of ivy off the wall. He threw it on the ground behind him and kept running.

"Bread crumbs?" Thomas asked, the old fairy tale popping into his mind. Such odd glimpses of his past had almost stopped surprising him.

"Bread crumbs," Minho replied. "I'm Haasle, you're Greer."

On they went, following the course of the Maze, sometimes running right, sometimes turning left. After every turn, Minho cut and dropped a one-meter length of ivy. Thomas couldn't help being impressed. Minho didn't even need to slow down to do it.

"Alright," the Keeper said, breathing heavier now. "Your turn."

"What?" Thomas hadn't really expected to do anything but run all day on his first day.

"Cut the ivy now - you gotta get used to doing it on the

run. We pick 'em up as we come back, or kick 'em to the side."

Thomas was happier than he thought he'd be at having something to do, though it took him a while to become good at it. The first couple of times, he had to sprint to catch up after cutting the ivy, and once he nicked his finger. But by his tenth attempt, he could almost match Minho at the task.

On they went. After they'd run awhile, Thomas had no idea how long or how far, but he guessed three miles. Minho slowed to a walk, then stopped altogether. "Break time." He swung off his pack and pulled out some water and an apple.

Thomas can't have been convinced to follow Minho's lead. He guzzled his water, relishing the wet coolness as it washed down his dry throat.

"Slow down there, Ashhead," Minho jeered. "Save some for later."

Thomas stopped drinking, sucked in a big, fast, deep breath, then burped. He took a bite of his apple, feeling surprisingly refreshed. For some reason, his thoughts turned back to the day Minho and Aloy had gone to look at the dead river—when everything had gone so wrong. You never really told me what happened that day, why he was in such bad shape. Obviously the Giver woke up, but what *happened*?"

Minho had already put his back to him. He looked ready to go. The stick thing wasn't dead. Aloy poked at it with his foot like an idiot, and then suddenly sprang to the spikes flailing at a boy on the ground over him. Something was wrong with it though, didn't really attack, he usually seemed like it was mostly just trying to get out of there, and poor Aloy was in the way."

"So it ran away from you guys." From what Thomas had seen on TV a few nights before, he couldn't imagine it.

Minho shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. Maybe it needed to get recharged or something. I don't know."

"What could've been wrong with it? Did you see anything

or anything" Thomas didn't know what kind of answer he was searching for but he was sure there had to be a clue or lesson to learn from what happened.

Minho thought for a minute "No. Shuck thing just looked dead like a wax statue. Then boom it was back to life."

Thomas's mind was churning, trying to get somewhere, only he didn't know where or which direction to even start in. "I just wonder where it *went*. Where they always go. Don't you?" He was quiet for a second then "Have it you ever thought of following them?"

"Man, you *do* have a death wish don't you?" Come on, we gotta go." And with that Minho turned and started running.

As Thomas followed, he struggled to figure out what was tickling the back of his mind. Something about that Griever being dead and then not dead, something about where it had gone once it sprang to life.

Frustrated, he put it aside and sprang up to catch up.

Thomas ran right behind Minho for two more hours, sprinkled with little breaks that seemed to get shorter every time. Good shape or not, Thomas was seeing his partner.

Finally Minho stopped and pulled off his rucksack once more. They sat on the ground, leaning against the soft ivy as they ate lunch, neither one of them talking much. Food was relished every bite of his sandwich and veggies eating as slowly as possible. He knew Minho would make them get up and go once the food wasp neared, so he took his time.

"Anything different today?" Thomas asked, curious.

Minho reached down and patted his rucksack, where his notes rested. "Just the usual war machine mess. Nothing to get your skinny butt excited about."

Thomas took a long swig of water, looking up at the ivy-covered wall opposite them. He caught a flash of silver and realized something he'd seen more than once that day.

"What's the deal with those beetle shades?" he asked. They

seemed to be everywhere. Then Thomas remembered what he'd seen in the Maze—so much had happened he hadn't had the chance to mention it. "And why do they have the word *wicked* written on their backs?"

"Never been able to catch one." Minho finished his meal and put his lunchbox away. "And we don't know what that word means—probably just something to scare us. But they have to be spies for *them*. Only thing we can reckon."

"Who is *them* anyway?" Thomas asked, ready for more answers. He hated the people behind the Maze. "Are they have a clue?"

"We don't know jack about the stupid creators." Minho's face reddened as he squeezed his hands together as if he was choking someone. "Can't wait to rip their—"

But before the Keeper could finish, Thomas was on his feet and across the corridor. "What's that?" he interrupted, heading for a dull glimmer of grey he'd just noticed behind the ivy on the wall, about head high.

"Oh, yeah, that," Minho said, his voice completely indifferent.

Thomas reached in and pried apart the curtains of ivy, then stared slack-jawed at a square of metal covered to the stone with words stamped across it in big capital letters. He put his hand out to run his fingers across them, as if he didn't believe his eyes.

WORLD IN CATASTROPHE KILL ZONE: CRIMINAL DEPARTMENT

He read the words aloud, then looked back at Minho. "What's this?" It gave him a chill—it had to have something to do with the Creators.

"I don't know, shank. They're all over the place, like freaking labels for the nice pretty Maze they had. I quit bothering to look at them a long time ago."

Thomas turned back to stare at the sign, trying to suppress the feeling of doom that had risen inside him. Not much here that sounds very good. Catastrophe. Krizme. Experiment. Really nice."

"Yeah, really nice. Greenie. Let's go."

Reluctantly, Thomas let the vines fall back into place and swung his rucksack over his shoulders. And off they went, those six words burning holes in his mind.

An hour after lunch, Minho stopped at the end of a long corridor. It was straight, the walls solid with no hallways branching off.

"The last dead end," he said to Thomas. "I'm not to go back."

Thomas sucked in a deep breath, trying not to think about only being halfway finished for the day. "Nothing new?"

"Just the usual changes to the way we got here—days half over." Minho replied as he looked at his watch emotionlessly. "Gotta go back." Without waiting for a response, the keeper turned and set off at a fast pace, headed far from where they'd just come.

Thomas followed, frustrated that they couldn't take time to examine the walls, explore a little. He finally pulled to a stop with Minho. "But—"

"Just shut it, dude. Remember what I said earlier—can't take any chances. Plus, think about it. You really think there's an exit anywhere? A secret trapdoor or something."

"I don't know—maybe. Why do you ask it that way?"

Minho shook his head, spat a big wad of something nasty to his left. "There's no exit. It's just more of the same. A wall is a wall. A wall. Solid."

Thomas let the heavy truth sink in, but pushed back anyway. "How do you know?"

"Because people willing to send Carevers after us aren't gonna give us an easy way out."

This made Thomas doubt the whole point of what they

were doing. "Then why even bother coming out here?"

Minho looked over at him. "Why *bother*? Because it's here gotta be a reason. But if you think we're gonna find a nice little gate that leads to Happy Town, you're smokin' cow funk."

Thomas looked straight ahead, feeling so hopeless he almost slowed to a stop. "This sucks."

"Smartest thing you've said yet, Greener."

Minho blew out a fog puff of air and kept running, and Thomas did the only thing he knew to do. He followed.

The rest of the day was a blur of exhaustion to Thomas. He and Minho made it back to the Glade, went to the Map Room, wrote up the day's Maze route, compared it to the previous days. Then there were the walls closing and dinner. Chuck tried talking to him several times, but all Thomas could do was nod and shake his head, only half-hearing; he was so tired.

Before twilight faded to blackness, he was already in his new favourite spot, in the forest corner, curled up against the ivy, wondering if he could ever run again. Wondering how he could possibly do the same thing tomorrow. Especially when it seemed so pointless. Being a Runner had lost its glamour. After one day.

Every ounce of the noble courage he'd felt the will to make a difference, the promise to himself to reunite Chuck with his family, it all vanished into an exhausted fog of hopeless, wretched weariness.

He was somewhere very close to sleep when a voice spoke in his head, a pretty feminine voice that sounded as if it came from a fairy goddess trapped in his skull. The next morning, when everything started going crazy, he'd wonder if the voice had been real or part of a dream. But he heard it all the same, and remembered every word.

Tom just triggered the Ending

CHAPTER 34

Thomas awoke to a weak, lifeless light. His first thought was that he must've woken up earlier than usual, that dawn was still an hour away. But then he heard the shouts. And then he looked up, through the catty canopy of branches.

The sky was a dull slab of grey – not the natural pale light of morning.

He jumped to his feet, put his hand on the wall to steady himself, as he craned his neck to gaze towards the heavens. There was no blue, no black, no stars, no purplish tan of a creeping dawn. The sky, every last centimetre of it, was slate grey. Colourless and dead.

He looked down at his watch – it was a full hour past his mandatory waking time. The brilliance of the sun should've awakened him – had done so easily since he'd arrived at the Glade. But not today.

He glanced upwards again, half-expecting it to have changed back to normal. But it was all grey. Not cloudy, not

twilight, not the early minutes of dawn. Just grey.
The sun had disappeared.

He may found most of the Leaders standing near the entrance to the Box, pointing at the dead sky, everyone talking at once. Based on the late breakfast should've already been served, people should be working. But there was something about the largest object in the solar system vanishing that tended to disrupt normal schedules.

In truth, as Thomas silently watched the commotion, he didn't feel nearly as panicked or frightened as his instincts told him he ought to be. And it surprised him that so many of the others looked like lost chicks thrown from the coop. It was, in fact, ridiculous.

The sun obviously had *not* disappeared—that wasn't possible.

Though that was what it seemed like—signs of the ball of furious fire nowhere to be seen, the starting shadows of morning absent. But he and all the Leaders were far too rational and intelligent to conclude such a thing. No, there had to be a scientifically acceptable reason for what they were witnessing. And whatever it was, to Thomas it meant one thing, the fact that they could no longer see the sun probably meant they'd never been able to in the first place. A sun couldn't just disappear. Their sky had to have been—and still was—*far* later. Artificial.

In other words, the sun that had shone down on these people for two years, providing heat and life to everything, was not the sun at all. Somehow, it had been fake. Everything about this place was fake.

Thomas didn't know what that meant, didn't know how it was possible. But he knew it to be true—it was the only explanation that all of them could accept. And it was obvious from the other Leaders' reactions that none of them had figured this out until now.

Chuck found him, and the look of fear on the boy's face pinched Thomas's heart.

"What do you think happened?" Chuck said, a pitiful tremor in his voice. His eyes glared to the sky. Thomas thought his neck must hurt something awful. "Looks like a big grey ceiling—close enough you could almost touch it."

Thomas lowered Chuck's gaze and looked up. "Yeah makes you wonder about this place." For the second time in twenty-four hours, Chuck had nailed it. The sky *did* look like a ceiling. Like the ceiling of a massive room. "Maybe something broken. I mean maybe it'll be back."

Chuck finally quit gawking and made eye contact with Thomas. "Broken? What's that supposed to mean?"

Before Thomas could answer, the best memory of last night, before he fell asleep, came to him. Teresa's words inside his mind. Ned said, *I just triggered the ending*. It could not be a coincidence, could it? A sinister crept into his belly. Whatever the explanation, whatever that had been in the sky, the real sun or not—it was gone. And that could not be a good thing.

"The what?" Chuck asked, lightly tapping him on the upper arm.

"Yeah. Thomas's mind felt heavy."

"What did you mean by broke it?" Chuck repeated.

Thomas felt like he needed time to think about it now. "Oh, I don't know. Must be things about this place we obviously don't understand. But you can't just make the sun disappear from space. Plus, there's still enough light to see by as fast as it is. Where's that coming from?"

Chuck's eyes widened as if the darkest, deepest secret of the universe had just been revealed to him. "Yeah, where is it coming from? What's going on, Thomas?"

Thomas reached out and squeezed the younger boy's shoulder. He felt awkward. No idea. Chuck. Not a clue. But I'm sure Newt and Alby'll figure things out."

"Thomas." Minho was running up to them. "Quit your

leisure time with Chucky here and lets get going. We're already late."

Thomas was stunned. For some reason hed expected the weird sky to throw all normal plans out of the window.

"You're still going out there?" Chucky asked, clearly surprised as well. Thomas was glad the boy had asked the question for him.

"Of course we are," said Minho said. "Don't you have some shopping to do?" He looked from Chucky to Thomas. "If anything, gives us even more reason to get our butts out here. If the suns ready gone, wont be long before plants and animals drop dead, too. I think the desperation level just went up a notch."

The last statement struck Thomas deep down. Despite all his ideas, all the things hed pitched to Minho, he wasn't eager to change how things had been done for the last two years. A mixture of excitement and dread swept over him when he realised what Minho was saying. "You mean we're going to stay out there overnight? Explore the walls a little more closely?"

Minho shook his head. "No, not yet. Maybe soon though." He looked up towards the sky. Man, what a way to wake up. "Come on, lets go."

Thomas was quiet as he and Minho got their things ready and ate a lightning-fast breakfast. His thoughts were swirling too much about the grey sky, and what Teresa, at least, he thought, it had been the girl, had to do with in his mind, to participate in any conversation.

What had she meant by "the Ending"? Thomas couldn't knock the feeling that he should tell somebody. Everybody.

But he didnt know what it meant, and he didnt want them to know he had a girls voice in his head. Theyd think hed really gone bonkers, maybe even lock him up, and for good this time.

After a lot of deliberation, he decided to keep his mouth

shirt and went running with Minhø for his second day of training, below a bleak and colourless sky.

They saw the Griever before they'd even made it to the door leading from Section Eight to Section One.

Minhø was a metre or two ahead of Thomas. He'd just rounded a corner to the right when he slammed to a stop, his feet almost skidding out from under him. He pumped back and grabbed Thomas by the shirt, pushing him against the wall.

"Shh." Minhø whispered. "There's a freaking Griever up there."

Thomas widened his eyes in question, felt his heart pick up the pace, even though it had already been pumping hard and steady.

Minhø simply nodded, then put his finger to his lips. He let go of Thomas's shirt and took a step back, then crept up to the corner around which he'd seen the Griever. Very slowly, he leaned forward to take a peek. Thomas wanted to scream at him to be careful.

Minhø's head jerked back and he turned to face Thomas. His voice was still a whisper. "It's just sitting up there - almost like that dead one we saw."

"What do we do?" Thomas asked as quietly as possible. He tried to ignore the panic flaring inside him. "Is it coming towards us?"

"No, don't - I just told you it was *sitting* there."

"Well?" Thomas raised his hands to his sides in frustration. "What do we do?" Standing so close to a Griever seemed like a really bad idea.

Minhø paused a few seconds, thinking before he spoke. "We have to go that way to get to our section. Let's just watch it awhile. If it comes after us, we'll run back to the Glade." He took another peek, then quickly looked over his shoulder. "Crap - it's gone! Come on!"

Minhø didn't wait for a response, didn't see the look of horror Thomas had just felt widen his own eyes. Minhø took

off running in the direction where he'd seen the Griever. Though his instincts told him not to, Thomas followed.

He sprinted down the long corridor after Minho turned left, then right. At every turn, they slowed so the Keeper could look around the corner first. Each time he whispered back to Thomas that he'd seen the tail end of the Griever disappearing around the next turn. This went on for ten minutes, until they came to the long hallway that ended at the Cliff, where beyond lay nothing but the featureless sky. The Griever was charging towards that sky.

Minho stopped so abruptly Thomas almost ran into him. When Thomas stared a shock as up ahead the Griever dug in with its spikes and spun forward right up to the Cliff's edge, then off into the grey abyss. The creature disappeared from sight, a shadow swallowed by more shadow.

CHAPTER 35

"That settles it," Minho said.

Thomas stood next to him on the edge of the Cliff, staring at the grey nothingness beyond. There was no sign of anything to the left, right, down, up, or ahead, for as far as he could see. Nothing but a wall of blankness.

"Settles what?" Thomas asked.

"We've seen it three times now. Somethings up."

"Yeah." Thomas knew what he meant, but waited for Minho's explanation anyway.

"That dead Greever found it that way, and we never saw it come back or go deeper into the Maze. Then those suckers we tricked into jumping past us."

"Tricked?" Thomas said. "Maybe not such a trick."

Minho looked over at him, contemptive. "Hmm. Anyway, even this." He pointed out at the abyss. "Not much doubt anymore—somehow the Greivers can *leave the Maze* this way. Looks like magic, but so does the sun disappearing."

"If *they* can leave this way," Thomas added, continuing

Minho listened reasoning, "so could we." A thrill of excitement shot through him.

Minho laughed. "Here's your death wish again. Wanna hang out with the Greivers, have a sandwich, maybe?"

Thomas felt his hopes drop. "Got any better ideas?"

"One thing at a time, Greiver. Let's go, some rocks and test this place out. There has to be some kind of hidden exit."

Thomas helped Minho as they searched around the corners and crannies of the Maze, picking up as many loose stones as possible. They got more by running cracks in the wall splitting broken chunks from the ground. When they finally had a sizable pile, they hauled it over right next to the edge and took a seat, feet dangling over the side. Thomas looked down and saw nothing but a grey descent.

Minho pulled out his pad and pencil, placed them on the ground next to him. "All right, we've gotta take good notes. And memorise it in that shack head of yours, too. If there's some kind of optical illusion hiding an exit from this place, I don't wanna be the one who screws up when the shank tries to jump into it."

"That shank oughta be the keeper of the Runners." Thomas said, trying to make a joke to hide his fear. Being this close to a place where Greivers might come out at any second was making him sweat. "You'd wanna hold on to one beauty of a rope."

Minho picked up a rock from the pile. "Yeah, okay, let's take turns passing them, zigzagging back and forth out there. There's some kind of magical exit, hopefully, that works with rocks and make them disappear."

Thomas took a rock and carefully threw it to the right, just in front of where the left wall of the corridor leading to the Climb met the edge. The jagged piece of stone fell. A click. Then disappeared into the grey emptiness.

Minho went next. He tossed his rock just half a metre farther out than Thomas had. It also fell far below. Thomas threw

another one another half metre out. Then Minho. Each rock fell to the depths. Thomas kept following Minho's orders - they continued until they'd marked a line reaching at least four metres from the Cliff, then moved their target pattern half a metre to the right and started coming back towards the Maze.

All the rocks fell. Another line out, another line back. All the rocks fell. They threw enough rocks to cover the entire left half of the area in front of them, covering the distance anyone or *anything* could possibly jump. Thomass discouragement grew with every toss, until it turned into a heavy mass of blah.

He couldn't help chiding himself - it had been a stupid idea.

Then Minho's next rock disappeared.

It was the strangest, most hard-to-believe thing Thomas had ever seen.

Minho had thrown a large chunk - a piece that had fallen from one of the cracks in the wall Thomas had watched, deeply concentrating on each and every rock. This one left Minho's hand, sailed forward, almost in the exact centre of the Cliff line, started its descent to the unseen ground far below. Then it vanished, as if it had fallen through a pane of water or mist.

One second there, falling. Next second gone.

Thomas couldn't speak.

"We've thrown stuff off the Cliff before," Minho said. "How could we have ever missed that? I never saw anything disappear. Never."

Thomas coughed, his throat felt raw. "Do it again - maybe we banked funny or something."

Minho did - throwing it at the same spot. And once again, it winked out of existence.

"Maybe you weren't looking carefully other times you threw stuff over," Thomas said. "I mean, it should be impossible - sometimes you don't look very hard for things you don't believe will or can happen."

They threw the rest of the rocks, aiming at the original spot.

and every centimetre around it. To Thomas's surprise, the spot in which the rocks disappeared proved only to be a metre or so square.

"No wonder we missed it," Minho said, furiously writing down notes and dimensions, his best attempt at a diagram. "It's kind of small."

"The Greys must have yanked through that thing," Thomas kept his eyes riveted to the area of the invisible floating square, trying to learn the distance and location in his mind, remembering exactly where it was. "And when they come out, they must balance on the rim of the hole and, only, over the empty space to the cliff edge. It's not that far. It's a dead jump. I'm sure it's easy for them."

Minho finished drawing, then looked up at the special spot. "How's this possible, dude? What're we looking at?"

"Like you said, it's not magic. Must be something like our skis turning grey, some kind of special skin or hologram, hiding a doorway. This place is packed up. And, Thomas admitted to himself, kind of cool. His mind craved to know what kind of technology could be behind it all.

"Yeah, packed up is right. Come on," Minho got up with a grunt and put on his tacksack. "Better get as much of the Maze run as we can. Without new, textured skis, maybe other weird things have happened out there. We'll let Newt and Amy amount this tonight. Don't know how they'll do it, but at least we know how where the skis go, or even go."

"And probably where they come from," Thomas said as he took one last look at the hidden doorway. "The Greys? Heh."

"Yeah, good a name as any. Let's go."

Thomas sat and stared, waiting for Minho to make a move. Several minutes passed in silence and Thomas realised his friend must be as fascinated as he was. Finally, without saying a word, Minho turned to leave. Thomas reluctantly followed and they ran into the grey-dark Maze.

* * *

Thomas and Minho found nothing but stone walls and vines.

Thomas did the vine-cutting and all the note-taking. It was hard for him to notice any changes from the day before, but Minho pointed out without thinking about it where the walls had moved. When they reached the final dead end and it was time to head back home, Thomas felt an almost uncontrollable urge to sag everything and stay there overnight, see what happened.

Minho seemed to sense it and grabbed his shoulder. "Not yet, dude. Not yet."

And so they'd gone back.

A sombre mood rested over the Glade, an easy thing to happen when all is grey. The dim light hadn't changed a bit since they'd woken up that morning, and Thomas wondered if anything would change at "sunset" either.

Minho headed straight for the Map Room as they came through the West Door.

Thomas was surprised. He thought it was the last thing they should do. "Aren't you dying to tell Newt and Ahy about the Griever Hole?"

"Hey, we're still Runners," Minho said, "and we still have a job." Thomas followed him to the steel door of the big concrete back and Minho turned to give him a wan smile. "But yeah, we'll do it quick so we can talk to them."

There were already other Runners milling about the room drawing up their Maps, when they entered. No one said a word, as if all speculation of the new sky had been exhausted. The hopelessness in the room made Thomas feel as if he were walking through mud, black water. He knew he should be exhausted, but he was too excited to feel that. He couldn't wait to see Newt's and Ahy's reactions to the news about the Cliff.

He sat down at the table and drew up the day's Map, based on his memory and notes, Minho looking over his shoulder, the whole time giving pointers. "Think that hill was actually cut off here, not there" and "Watch your proportions" and "Draw

straighten, you shank" He was annoying but he persisted and fifteen minutes after entering the room Thomas examined his finished product. Pride washed through him. It was just as good as any other Map he'd seen.

"Not bad," Minh said. "For a Creeper anyway."

Minh got up and walked over to the Section Cart track and opened it. Thomas knelt down in front of it, took out the Map from the day before, and held it up side by side with the one he'd just drawn.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

Patterns. But looking at two days' worth she couldn't tell you back. You really need to study several weeks. Look for patterns, anything I know there's something there, something that'll help us. Just can't find it yet. I feel I said it sucks.

Thomas had an itch in the back of his mind, the same one he'd felt the very first time in this room. The Maze was showing Patterns. All those straight lines, were they suggesting an entirely different kind of map? Pointing to something. He had such a heavy feeling that he was missing an obvious hint or clue.

Minh tapped him on the shoulder. "You can always come back and study your butt off after dinner, after we talk to Newt and Alby. Come on."

Thomas put the papers in the track and closed it, hating the twinge of pleasure he felt. It was like a prick in his side. Was moving straight lines, patterns... there had to be an answer. "Okay, let's go."

As they just stepped outside the Map Room, the heavy door clanging shut behind them, when Newt and Alby walked up, met her and they looked very happy. Thomas's excitement immediately turned to worry.

"Hey," Minh said. "We were just..."

"What with?" Alby interrupted. "Am I going to waste? Find anything? Anything?"

Minh awkwardly recoiled at the harsh rebuke, but his face

seemed more confused to Thomas than hurt or angry. "Nice to see you too. Yeah, we *did* find something, actually."

Oddly, Aby almost looked disappointed. "Clearly this whole shuck place is falling to pieces." He shot Thomas a nasty glare as if it were all his fault.

What's wrong with them? Thomas thought, feeling his own anger light up. They'd been working hard all day and this was their thanks?

"What do you mean?" Minho asked. "What else happened?"

Newt answered, nodding towards the Box as he did so. "Boggy supplies didn't come today. Come every week for two years, same time, same day. But not today."

All four of them looked over at the steel doors attached to the ground. To Thomas, there seemed to be a shadow hovering over it darker than the grey air surrounding everything else.

Oh, we're shucked for good now." Minho whispered, his reaction affecting Thomas to how grave the situation really was.

"No sun for the plants," Newt said. "no supplies from the bloody Box - yeah, I'd say we're shucked, all right."

Aby had fixed his arms, still glaring at the Box as if trying to open the doors with his mind. Thomas hoped their chatter didn't bring up what he'd seen in the Changing - or anything related to Thomas, for that matter, especially now.

"Yeah, anyway," Minho continued. "We found something weird."

Thomas waited, hoping that Newt or Aby would have a positive reaction to the news, maybe even have further information or shed light on the mystery.

Newt raised his eyebrows. "What?"

Minho took a full three minutes to explain, starting with the Creek they followed and ending with the results of their rock-throwing experiment.

"Must lead to where the - ya know - Grievors live," he said when finished.

"The Griever Hole" Thomas added. All three of them looked at him annoyed, as if he had no right to speak. But for the first time being treated like the Green didn't bother him that much.

"Go to bloody see that for myself" Newt said. Then murmured, "Hard to be sure." Thomas couldn't have agreed more.

"I don't know what we can do," Mirho said. "Maybe we could build something to block off that corridor."

"No way," Newt said. "Shuck things can climb the bloody walls, remember? Nothing we could build would keep them out."

But a commotion outside the Homestead shifted their attention away from the conversation. A group of Graders stood at the front door of the house shouting to be heard over each other. Chuck was in the group, and when he saw Thomas and the others he ran over, a look of excitement spread across his face. Thomas could only wonder what crazy thing had happened now.

"What's going on?" Newt asked.

"She's awake!" Chuck yelled. "The girl's awake!"

Thomas's insides twisted, he leaned against the concrete wall of the Map Room. The girl. The girl who spoke in his head. He wanted to run before it happened again, before she spoke to him in his mind.

But it was too late.

Just I don't know any of these people. Come and get me. It's all fading. I'm forgetting everything in you. I have to tell you things! But it's all fading.

He couldn't understand how she said it, how she was inside his head.

Terest paused, then said something that made no sense.
The Maze is a code. I am. The Maze is a code.

CHAPTER 36

Thomas didn't want to see her. He didn't want to see anybody.

As soon as Newt set off to go and talk to the gr, Thomas silently slipped away, hoping no one would notice him in the excitement. With everyone's thoughts on the stranger waking up from her coma, it proved easy. He skirted the edge of the village, then breaking into a run, he headed for his place of seclusion behind the Deadhead forest.

He crouched in the corner, nestled in the ivy, and threw his blanket over himself, head and all. Somehow, it seemed like a way to hide from Teresa's intrusion into his mind. A few minutes passed, his heart finally calming to a slow toll.

"Forgetting about you was the worst part."

At first, Thomas thought it was another message in his head, he squeezed his fists against his ears. But no, it was different. He'd heard it with his ears. Ag's voice. Chris creeping up his spine. He slowly lowered the blanket.

Teresa stood to his right, leaning against the massive stone

wal. She looked so different now, awake and alert *standing*. Wearing a long-sleeved white shirt, blue jeans and brown shoes, she looked impossibly even more striking than when he'd seen her in the coma. Black hair framed the fair skin of her face with eyes the blue of pure flame.

"Tom, do you really not remember me?" Her voice was soft, a contrast from the crazed, hard sound he'd heard from her after she first arrived, when she'd delivered the message that *everything was going to change*.

"You mean... you remember *me*?" he asked, embarrassed at the squeak that escaped on the last word.

"Yes. No. Maybe." She threw her arms up in disgust. "I can't explain it."

Thomas opened his mouth, then closed it without saying anything.

"I remember *remembering*," she muttered, sitting down with a heavy sigh, she patted her legs up to wrap her arms around her knees. "Feelings. Emotions. Like... have as these she yes in my head... aetles, for memories and files, but they're empty. As if everything before this is just on the other side of a white curtain. Including you."

"But how do you know me?" He felt like the walls were spinning around him.

Leresa turned towards him. "I don't know. Something about before we came to the Maze. Something about us. It's mostly empty, like I said."

"You know about the Maze? Who told you? You just woke up."

"I... it's a little confusing right now." She held a hand out. "But I know you're my friend."

A moment later, Thomas patted the basket completely off and leaned forward to shake her hand. "Like how you said me Tom?" As soon as it came out, he was sure he couldn't have possibly said anything dumber.

Leresa rolled her eyes. "That's your *name*, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but most people call me Thomas. Well except Newt he calls me Tommy. Tom makes me feel like I'm at home or something. Even though I don't know what home is." He let out a bitter laugh. "Are we messed up or what?"

She smiled for the first time, and he almost had to look away as if something that nice didn't belong in such a grim and grey place, as if he had no right to look at her expression.

"Yeah, we're messed up," she said. "And I'm scared."

"So am I, trust me." Which was definitely the understatement of the day.

A long moment passed, both of them looking towards the ground.

"What's..." he began, not sure how to ask it. "How did you talk to me inside my mind?"

Teresa shook her head. *No idea. I can just do it*, she thought to him. Then she spoke aloud again. "It's like if you tried to ride a bicycle here... if they had one, I bet you could do it without thinking. But do you remember learning to ride one?"

"No, I mean... I remember riding it, but not learning. He paused, feeling a wave of sadness. "Or who taught me?"

"Well," she said, her eyes flickering as if she was embarrassed by his sudden gloom. "Anyway... it's kind of like that."

"Really clears things up."

Teresa shrugged. "You didn't tell anyone, did you? They'd think we're crazy."

"Well... when it first happened, I did. But I think Newt thinks I was stressed out or something." Thomas felt fidgety. He hedged his bet. If he didn't move the stool up, started pacing in front of her. "We need to figure things out. That would make you have about the best chance to ever come here, your coma, the fact you can talk to me telepathically. Any ideas?"

Teresa lowered him with her eyes as he wobbled back and forth. "Save your breath and quit asking. All I have are faint impressions... that you and I were important, that we were *used*

somehow. That we're smart. That we came here for a reason. I know I triggered the Ending, whatever that means." She groaned, her face redoubling. "My memories are as useless as yours."

Thomas knelt down in front of her. "No, they're not. I mean, the fact that you knew my memory had been wiped without asking me—and this other stuff. You're way ahead of me and everybody else."

Their eyes met for a long time. It looked like her mind was spinning, trying to make sense of it all.

I just don't know, she said in his mind.

"There you go again," Thomas said aloud, though he was relieved that her trick didn't really break him out any more. "How do you do that?"

"I just do, and I bet you can, too."

"We I can't say I'm quite anxious to try." He sat back down and pulled his legs up, much like she had done. "You said something to me—in my head—right before you found me over here. You said, 'The Maze is a crime.' What did you mean?"

She shook her head slightly. "When I first woke up, it was like I'd entered an insane asylum—these strange guys hovering over my bed, the world tipping around me, memories swirling in my brain. I tried to reach out and grasp a few, and that was one of them. I can't really remember, but *they* said it."

"Was there anything else?"

"Actually, yeah." She pulled up the sleeve of her left arm, exposing her bicep. Small letters were written across the skin in thin black ink.

"What's that," he asked, leaning in for a better look.

"Read it yourself."

The letters were messy, but he could make them out when he got close enough.

WICKED is good

Thomas's heart beat faster "I've seen that word *wicked* " He searched his mind for what the phrase could possibly mean "On the little trees that live here The beetle blades "

"What are those?" she asked.

"Just little lizard-like machines that spy on us for the Creators the people who sent us here "

Teresa considered that for a moment looking off into space Then she focused on her arm "I can't remember why I wrote this " she said as she wet her thumb and started rubbing off the words "But don't let me forget it has to mean something."

The three words ran through Thomas's mind over and over "When did you write it?"

"When I woke up. They had a pen and a notepad next to the bed In the commotion I wrote it down "

Thomas was baffled by this girl First she connected her bed far to her from the very beginning, then the man speaking now this "Everything about you is weird You know that right?"

"Judging by your little hairy spot, I'd say you're not so normal yourself I like living in the woods do you?"

Thomas tried to scowl then smiled He felt pathetic and embarrassed about his ding "Well you look familiar to me and you claim we're friends I guess I lost you."

He held out his hand for another shake, and she took it, holding on for a long time A chill swept through Thomas that was surprisingly pleasant

Al I want to get back home she said finally letting go of his hand "Just like the rest of you "

Thomas's heart sank as he snapped back to reality and remembered how grim the world had become "Yeah, well things pretty much suck right about now " he said as darkness appeared and the sky's gone grey they didn't send us the weekly supplies looks like things are going to end one way or another "

But before Teresa could answer New was running out of the woods "How in the " he said as he picked up in front

of them. Abby and a few others were right behind him. Newt looked at Teresa. "How'd you get here? Med-jack said you were there one second and bugb'n gone the next."

Teresa stood up, surprising Thomas with her confidence. "I guess he forgot to tell the little part about me jacking him in the groin and climbing out the window."

Thomas almost laughed as Newt turned to an older boy standing nearby, whose face had turned bright red.

"Congrats. Jeff!" Newt said. "You're officially the first guy here to get your butt beat by a girl."

Teresa didn't stop. Keep talking like that and you'll be next."

Newt turned back to face them, but his face showed anything but fear. He stood, silent, just staring at them. Thomas stared back, wondering what was going through the older boy's head.

Abby stepped up. "I'm sick of this." He pointed at Thomas's chest, almost rapping it. "I wanna know who you are, who this sick girl is, and how you guys know each other."

Thomas almost smiled. "Abby, I swear—"

"She came straight to you after waking up, slack face!"

Anger surged inside Thomas, and worry that Abby would go off like Ben had. "So what? I know her, she knows me—or at least we used to. That doesn't mean anything. I can't remember anything. Neither can she."

Abby looked at Teresa. "What did you do?"

Thomas, confused by the question, glanced at Teresa to see if she knew what he meant. But she didn't reply.

"What did you do?" Abby screamed. "First the sky, now this."

"I triggered something," she replied in a calm voice. "Not on purpose. I swear it. The Ending. I don't know what it means."

"What's wrong, Newt?" Thomas asked, not wanting to talk to Abby directly. "What's happened?"

But Abby grabbed him by the shirt. "What's happened? I'll tell ya what's happened. shank. Too busy makin' every eyes to bother lookin' around? In bother noticing what, *freaking time it is!*"

Thomas looked at his warch, realising with horror what he'd missed, knowing what Abby was about to say before he said it.

'The *units*, you shuck. The *Deary*. They didn't close tonight."

CHAPTER 37

Thomas was speechless. Everything would be different now. No sun, no supplies, no protection from the Greycers. Teresa had been right from the beginning, everything had changed. Thomas felt as if his breath had suddenly lodged itself in his throat.

Alby pointed at the girl. "I want her, locked up. Now. Blay Jackson. Put her in the Stamper, and ignore every word that comes out of her stuck mouth."

Teresa didn't react, but Thomas did enough for both of them. "Where're you talking about, Alby, you can't—" He stopped when Alby's fiery eyes shot such a look of anger at him. He felt his heart shatter. "But—how could you possibly blame her for the walls not closing?"

Newt stepped up, lightly placed a hand on Alby's chest and pushed him back. "How could we not, Tommy? She barely admitted it herself."

Thomas turned to look at Teresa, paled at the sadness in her blue eyes. It felt like something had reached through his chest

and squeezed his heart.

"Just be glad you aren't going with her, Thomas," Alby said, he gave both of them one last glare before leaving. Thomas had never wanted so badly to punch someone.

Bidy and Jackson came forward and grabbed Teresa by both arms, started escorting her away.

Before they could enter the trees, though, Newt stopped them. "Stay with her. I don't care what happens, no one's gonna touch this girl. Swear your lives on it."

The two guards nodded, then walked away. Teresa now it hurt Thomas even more to see how willingly she went. And he couldn't believe how sad he felt - he wanted to keep talking to her. *But I just met her* he thought. *I don't even know her.* Yet he knew that wasn't true. He already felt a closeness that could only have come from knowing her before the memory-wiped existence of the Glade.

Come and see me, she said in his mind.

He didn't know how to do it, how to talk to her like that. But he tried anyway.

I will. At least you'll be safe in there.

She didn't respond.

Teresa?

Nothing.

The next thirty minutes were an eruption of mass confusion.

Though there had been no discernible change in the light since the sun and blue sky hadn't appeared that morning, it suddenly felt like a darkness spread over the Glade. As Newt and Alby gathered the Keepers and put them in charge of making assignments and getting their groups inside the Homestead within the hour, Thomas felt like nothing more than a spectator, not sure how he could help.

The Builders - without their leader, Gally, who was still missing - were ordered to put up barricades at each open Door they needed, although Thomas knew there was, *at least,* one

and there weren't the materials to do much good. It almost seemed to him as if the Keepers wanted people busy, wanted to delay the inevitable panic attacks. Thomas helped as the Builders gathered every stone rem they could find and pieced them in the gaps, nailing things together as best they could. It looked ugly and pathetic and scared him to death, no way that'd keep the Grievors out.

As Thomas worked, he caught glimpses of the other boys going on across the Glade.

Every trich in the compound was gathered and distributed to as many people as possible. Newt said he planned for everyone to sleep in the Homestead that night and that they'd kill the lights, except for emergencies. Frypan's task was to take all the non-perishable food out of the store and store it in the Homestead, in case they got trapped there. Thomas could only imagine how nervous that'd be. Others were gathering supplies and tools. Thomas saw Minho carrying weapons from the basement to the main building. Abby had made it clear they could take no chances, they'd make the Homestead their fortress and must do whatever it took to defend it.

Thomas finally stuck away from the Builders and helped Minho, carrying up boxes of knives and barbed wire wrapped cubes. Then Minho said he had a special assignment from Newt, and more or less told Thomas to get lost, refusing to answer any of his questions.

That hurt Thomas a bit, but he left anyway, really wanting to talk to Newt about something else. He finally found him, crossing the Glade on his way to the Board House.

"Newt," he called out, trying to catch up. "You have to listen to me."

Newt stopped so suddenly Thomas almost ran into him. The older boy turned to give Thomas such an annoyed look he thought twice about saying anything.

"Make it quick," Newt said.

Thomas almost balked, not sure how to say what he was thinking.

"You've gotta let the girl go, Teresa." He knew that she could only help, that she might still remember something valuable.

"Ah, glad to know you guys are buddies now." Newt started walking off. "Don't waste my time, Tommy."

Thomas grabbed his arm. "Listen to me! There's something about her. I think she and I were sent here to help end this whole thing."

"Yeah – and it be ettin' the bloody Grevers waltz in here and kill us? I've heard some sucky plans in my day, Greeme, but that's got 'em all beat."

Thomas groaned, wanting Newt to know how frustrated he felt. "No, I don't think that's what it means – the walls not closing."

Newt folded his arms; he looked exasperated. "Greeme, what're you yappin' about?"

Ever since Thomas had seen the words on the wall of the Maze – *world in catastrophe, killzone experiment department* – he'd been thinking about them. He knew if there was anyone who would believe him, it would be Newt. "I think... I think we're here as part of some weird experiment, or test, or something like that. But it's supposed to end somehow. We can't live here for ever – whoever sent us here *wants* it to end. One way or another." Thomas was relieved to get it off his chest.

Newt rubbed his eyes. "And that's supposed to convince me that everything's jolly – that I should let the girl go? Because she came and everything is suddenly do-or-die?"

"No, you're missing the point. I don't think she has anything to do with us being here. She's just a pawn – they sent her here as our last tool or hint or whatever to help us get out." Thomas took a deep breath. "And I think they sent me, too. Just because she was the trigger for the Ending doesn't make her bad."

Newt looked towards the Slammer. "You know what, I don't bugg'n' care right now. She can handle one night in there – if

anything, she'll be safer than us."

Thomas nodded, sensing a compromise. "Okay, we get through tonight somehow. Tomorrow, when we have a whole day of safety, we can figure out what to do with her. Figure out what we're supposed to do."

Newt snorted. "Tommy, who's gonna make tomorrow any different? It's been two bloody years, ya know."

Thomas had an overwhelming feeling that all of these changes were a spat, a cat's paw for the endgame. Because now we *have* to solve it. We'll be forced to. We can't live that way any more, day to day, thinking that what matters most is getting back to the Glade before the Doors close, snug and safe."

Newt thought a minute as he stood there, the noise of the Glader preparations surrounding both of them. "Dig deeper. Stay out there while he wads move."

"Exactly." Thomas said. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. And maybe we could barricade or blow up the entrance to the Greasy Hole. Buy time to analyse the Maze."

"Ah, yes, the one who won't let the gnomes," Newt said with a nod towards the H-mestead. "That guy's not too high on your two-shanks. But right now we've just gotta slim ourselves and get to the wake-up."

Thomas nodded. "We can fight 'em off."

"Don't be over-*save* of you, Hercules!" With a smug or even waiting for a response, Newt walked away, yelling at people to finish up and get inside the H-mestead.

Thomas was happy with the conversation. It had gone about as well as he could've possibly hoped. He decided to hurry and ask Teresa before it was too late. As he sprang for the Hammer on the back side of the H-mestead, he watched as Gladers started moving in a mass, most of them with at least one thing or another.

Thomas pulled up outside the small area and caught his breath. Teresa? The final yanked through the barren window of the lightless cell.

Her face popped up on the other side, startling him.

He let out a small yelp before he could stop it. It took him a second to recover his wits. "You can be downright spooky, ya know?"

"That's very sweet," she said. "Thanks." In the darkness, her blue eyes seemed to glow like a cat's.

"You're welcome," he answered, ignoring her sarcasm. "Listen. I've been thinking." He paused to gather his thoughts.

"More than I can say for that Abby schmuck," she muttered.

Thomas agreed, but was anxious to say what he'd come to say. "There's gotta be a way out of this place. We just have to push it, stay out in the Maze longer. And what you wrote on your arm, and what you said about a code, that has to mean something, right?" *It has to*, he thought. He couldn't help feeling some hope.

"Yeah. I've been thinking the same thing. But first - can you get me out of here?" Her hands appeared, gripping the bars of the window. Thomas felt the ridiculous urge to reach out and touch them.

"Well, Newt said maybe tomorrow." Thomas was just glad he'd got that much of a concession. "You'll have to make it through the night in there. It might actually be the safest place in the Glade."

"Thanks for asking him. Should we just sleep on the cold floor?" She motioned behind her with a thumb. "Though I guess a Creeper can't squeeze through this window, so... I'll be happy, right?"

The mention of Creepers surprised him. He didn't remember talking about them to her yet. "Aeresa, are you sure you've forgotten everything?"

She thought a second. "It's weird. I guess I don't remember some things. I just heard people talking while I was in the coma."

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter right now. I just wanted to see you before I went inside for the night." But he didn't want

to leave he almost wished he could get thrown in the Slammer with her. He grinned inside. He could only imagine News's response to *that* request.

"Tom?" Teresa said.

Thomas realised he was staring off in a daze. "Oh, sorry. Yeah?"

Her hands slipped back into her pockets. All he could see were her eyes, the pale glow of her white skin. "I don't know if I can do this, say in this particular light."

Thomas felt an incredible sadness. He wanted to steal News's keys and help her escape. But he knew that was a ridiculous idea. She'd just have to suffer and make do. He stared into those glowing eyes. "At least it won't get completely dark. Looks like we're stuck with this twilight funk twenty-four hours a day now."

"Yeah?" She looked past him at the Homestead, then focused on him again. "I'm a tough girl. I'll be okay."

Thomas felt horrible leaving her there, but he knew he had no choice. "I'll make sure they let you out first thing tomorrow, okay?"

She smiled, making him feel better. "That's a promise, right?"

"Promise." Thomas tapped his right temple. "And if you get lonely, you can talk to me with your... truck. All you want, try to answer back." He'd accepted it now and so wanted it. He just hoped he could figure out how to talk back, so they could have a conversation.

You'll get it soon. Teresa said in his mind.

"I wish." He stood there, ready but wanting to leave. "At all. You'd better go," she said. "I can't want your brata murder on my conscience."

Thomas managed his own smile at that. "All right. See you tomorrow."

And before he could change his mind, he stepped away, heading around the corner towards the front door of the

Homestead, just as the last couple of Graders were entering, Newt showing them in like errand chickens. Thomas stepped inside as well, followed by Newt, who closed the door behind him.

Just before it reached him, Thomas thought he heard the first errand man of the Grievors, coming from somewhere deep in the Maze.

The night had begun.

CHAPTER 38

Most of the men slept outside in normal times, so packing all their things and boxes into the Homestead made for a tight fit. The Keepers had organised and distributed the Graders throughout the rooms, along with blankets and pillows. Despite the number of people and the chaos of such a change, a disturbing silence hung over the activities, as if no one wanted to draw attention to themselves.

When everyone was settled, Thomas found himself upstairs with Newt, Abby and M'cho, and they were finally able to finish their discussion from earlier in the courtyard. Abby and Newt sat on the only bed in the room while Thomas and M'cho sat next to them in chairs. The only other furniture was a crooked wooden dresser and a small table on top of which rested a lamp providing what light they had. The grey darkness seemed to press on the window from outside with promises of bad things to come.

"Closest I've come so far," Newt was saying, "to hanging it all up, shuck it all and kiss a Gr over goodnight. Supplies cu-

bloody grey skies, walls not closing. But we can't give up, and we all know it. The buggers who sent us here either want us dead or they're giving us a spur. This or that, we gotta work our arses off till we're dead or not dead."

Thomas nodded, but didn't say anything. He agreed completely but had no concrete ideas on what to do. If he could just make it to tomorrow, maybe he and Teresa could come up with something to help.

Thomas glanced over at Alby, who was staring at the floor seemingly lost in his own gloomy thoughts. His face still wore the long, weary look of depression, his eyes sunken and hollow. The Changing had been aptly named, considering what it had done to him.

"Alby?" Newt asked. "Are you gonna pitch in?"

Alby looked up, surprise crossing his face as if he hadn't known that anyone else was in the room. "Huh? Oh. Yeah. Good that. But you've seen what happens at night. Just because Greenie the freaking superbri made it doesn't mean the rest of us can."

Thomas rolled his eyes ever so slightly at Minho – so tired of Alby's attitude.

If Minho felt the same way, he did a good job of hiding it. "I'm with Thomas and Newt. We've gotta quit boo-hoing and feeling sorry for ourselves." He rubbed his hands together and sat forward in his chair. "Tomorrow morning, first thing, you guys can assign teams to study the Maps full time while the Runners go out. We'll pack our stuff, shack fast so we can stay out there a few days."

"What?" Alby asked, his voice finally showing some emotion. "What do you mean *days*?"

"I mean *days*. With open Doors and no sunset, there's no point in coming back here, anyway. Gotta stay out there and see if anything opens up when the walls move. *If* they *will* move."

"No way." Alby said. "We have the Homestead to hide in – and if that ain't workin', the Map Room and the Summer. We

can't break, it's ask people to go out there and die. Minho? Who'd volunteer for that?"

"Me," Minho said. "And Thomas."

Everyone looked at Thomas; he simply nodded. Although it scared him to death, exploring the Maze—really exploring it—was something he'd wanted to do from the first time he'd learned about it.

"I will if I have to," Newt said, surprising Thomas, though he'd never talk about it; the older boy's limp was a constant reminder that something horrible had happened to him out in the Maze. "And I'm sure all the Runners'll do it."

"With your bum leg," Alby asked, a harsh laugh escaping his lips.

Newt frowned, looked at the ground. "Well, I don't feel good asking Gladders to do something if I'm not bloody willing to do it myself."

Alby scooted back on the bed and propped his feet up. "Whatever. Do what you want."

"Do what I want?" Newt asked, standing up. "What's wrong with you, man? Are you telling me we have a choice? Should we just sit around on our butts and wait to be snuffed by the Gners?"

Thomas wanted to stand up and cheer sure that Alby would finally snap out of his delusions.

But their leader didn't look in the least bit reprimanded or remorseful. "Well, it sounds better than running to them."

Newt sat back down. "Alby, you've got to start talking reason."

As much as he hated to admit it, Thomas knew they needed Alby if they were going to accomplish anything. The Gladders looked up to him.

Alby finally took a deep breath, then looked at each of them in turn. "You guys know I'm all screwed up. Seriously, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be the stupid leader any more."

Thomas held his breath. He couldn't believe Alby had just said that.

"Oh, bloody—" Nwrt started.

"No!" Abby shouted, his face showing him only surrender. "That's not what I meant. Listen to me. I am saying we should switch or any of that kind. I'm just saying—I think I need to let you guys make the decisions. I don't trust myself. So yeah, I'll do whatever."

Thomas could see that both M'aho and Nwrt were as surprised as he was.

"Oh—okay," Nwrt said slowly. As if he was unsure. "We'll make it work. I promise. You I see."

"Yeah." Abby muttered. After a long pause, he spoke up, a hint of odd excitement in his voice. "Hey, tell you what. Put me in charge of the Maps. I'll freaking work every Glacier to the bone studying those things."

"Works for me," M'aho said. Thomas wanted to agree, but didn't know if it was his place.

Abby put his feet back on the floor, sat up straighter. "Yeah, well, I was really set up with us to sleep in here tonight. We should've been out in the Map Room working."

Thomas thought that was the smartest thing he'd heard Abby say in a long time.

M'aho shrugged. "Probably right."

"We—I'll go," Abby said with a confident nod. "Right now."

Nwrt shook his head. "Forget that. Abby. Ahead heard he already. Griefers moaning out there. We can wait till the wake-up."

Abby leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Hey, you shucks are the ones giving me all the pep talks. Don't start whining when I actually listen. If I'm gonna do this, I gotta do it by the old me. I need something to dive into."

Relief flooded Thomas. He'd grown sick of all the contention.

Abby stood up. "Seriously, I need this." He moved towards the door of the room, as if he really meant to leave.

"You can't be serious," Newt said. "You can't go out there now!"

"I'm going, and that's that." Andy took his ring of keys from his pocket and rattled them mockingly. Thomas couldn't believe the sudden bravery. "See you sharks in the morning." And then he walked out.

It was strange to know that the night was growing later, that darkness should've swallowed the world around them but to see only the pale grey light outside. It made Thomas feel off kilter, as if the urge to sleep that grew steadily with every passing minute were somehow unnatural. Time slowed in an agonising crawl; he felt as if the next day might never come.

The other Gladers settled themselves, turning in with their pillows and blankets for the impossible task of sleeping. No one said much; the mood sombre and grim. All that could hear were quiet shuffles and whispers.

Thomas tried hard to force himself to sleep, knowing it would make the time pass faster. But after two hours he'd still had no luck. He lay on the floor in one of the upper rooms, on top of a thick blanket, several other Gladers crammed in there with him, almost body to body. The bed had gone to Newt.

Chuck had ended up in another room, and for some reason Thomas pictured him huddled in a dark corner, crying, squeezing his blankets to his chest like a teddy bear. The image saddened Thomas so deeply he tried to replace it but it was vain.

Almost every person had a torch by their side in case of emergency. Otherwise, Newt had ordered all lights extinguished except the pale, deathly glow of the fluorescent tubes, to sense attracting any more attention was not necessary. Anything that *could* be done on such short notice to prepare for a cat ever attack had been done: windows boarded up, furniture moved in front of doors, knives handed out as weapons.

But none of that made Thomas feel safe.

The anticipation of what might happen was overpowering, a suffocating blanket of misery and fear that began to take on a life of its own. He almost wished the suckers would just come and get it over with. The waiting was unbearable.

The distant wails of the Griefers grew closer as the night stretched on, every minute seeming to last longer than the one before it.

Another hour passed. Then another. Sleep finally came, but in miserable fits. Thomas guessed it was about two in the morning when he turned from his back to his stomach for the millionth time that night. He put his hands under his chin and stared at the foot of the bed, almost a shadow in the dim light.

Then everything changed.

A mechanised surge of machinery sounded from outside followed by the familiar rolling cacks of a Griever on the stony ground, as if someone had scattered a handful of nails. Thomas shot to his feet, as did most of the others.

But Newt was up before anyone, waving his arms, then shuffling the room by putting a finger to his lips. Flavouring his bad leg, he tipped towards the lone window in the room which was covered by three hastily nailed boards. Large cracks allowed for plenty of space to peek outside. Carefully, Newt leaned in to take a look, and Thomas crept over to join him.

He crouched below Newt against the lowest of the wooden boards, pressing his eye against a crack. It was terrifying being so close to the wall. But all he saw was the open Glade. He didn't have enough space to look up or down or to the side, just straight ahead. After a minute or so, he gave up and turned to sit with his back against the wall. Newt walked over and sat back down on the bed.

A few minutes passed, various Griever sounds permeating the walls every ten to twenty seconds. The squeal of small engines followed by a grinding spin of metal. The cacking of spikes against the hard stone. Things snapping and opening

and snapping. Thomas winced in fear every time he heard something.

Sounded like three or four of them were just outside. At least.

He heard the twisted animal machines come closer, so close waiting on the stone blocks below. All hums and metallic clatter.

Thomas's mouth dried up. He'd seen them face to face, remembered it all too well. He had to remind himself to breathe. The others in the room were still, no one made a sound. Fear seemed to hover in the air like a buzzard of black snow.

One of the Grievors sounded like it was moving towards the house. Then the clicking of its spikes against the stone suddenly turned into a deeper, holower sound. Thomas could picture it all: the creature's metal spikes digging into the wooden sides of the Homestead, the massive creature roaring as it climbed up towards their room, defying gravity with its strength. Thomas heard the Grievor's spikes shred the wood siding in their path as they tore out and rotated around to take hold once again. The whole building shuddered.

The crunching and groaning and snapping of the wood became the only sounds in the world to Thomas, horrifying. They grew louder, closer. The other boys had shuffled across the room and as far away from the window as possible. Thomas finally followed suit. Next right beside him, everyone huddled against the far wall, staring at the window.

Just when it grew unbearable—just as Thomas realised the Grievor was right outside—the window—everything fell silent. Thomas could almost hear his own heart beating.

Lights flickered out there, casting odd beams through the cracks between the wooden boards. Then a thin shadow erupted, the light moving back and forth. Thomas knew that the Grievor's probes and weapons had come out, searching for a feast. He imagined beetle blades out there, helping the creatures

find their way. A few seconds later, the shadow stopped, the light settled to a standstill, casting three unmoving planes of brightness into the room.

The tension in the air was thick. Thomas couldn't hear anyone breathing. He thought much the same must be going on in the other rooms of the Homestead. Then he remembered Teresa in the Stammer.

He was just wishing she'd say something to him when the door from the hallway suddenly whipped open. Gasps and shouts exploded throughout the room. The Gladers had been expecting something from the window, not from behind them. Thomas turned to see who'd opened the door, expecting a frightened Chuck or maybe a reconsidering Alby. But when he saw who stood there, his skull seemed to contract, squeezing his brain in shock.

It was Gally.

CHAPTER 39

Gally's eyes raged with unaccy his clothes were torn and filthy. He dropped to his knees and stayed there, his chest heaving with deep sucking breaths. He looked abt at the room like a rabid dog searching for someone to bite. No one said a word. It was as if they all believed as Thomas did - that Gally was only a figment of their imagination.

"They s'k!l you!" Gally screamed, spittle flying everywhere. "The Greivers will kill you all - one every night till it's over!"

Thomas watched, speechless, as Gally staggered to his feet and waked forward, dragging his right leg with a heavy limp. No one in the room moved a muscle as they watched, obviously too stunned to do anything. Even Newt stood with his mouth agape. Thomas was almost more afraid of their surprise visitor than he was of the Greivers lurking outside the window.

Gally stopped, standing just a metre or two in front of Thomas and Newt. He pointed at Thomas with a bloody finger. "You," he said with a sneer so pronounced it went past comfort to flat-out disturbing. "It's all your fault!" Without warning he

swing his left hand, forming it into a fist as it came around and crashed into Thomas's ear. Crying out, Thomas crumpled to the ground, more taken by surprise than pain. He scrambled to his feet as soon as he could hit the floor.

Newt had finally snapped out of his daze and pushed Gally away. Gally stumbled backwards and crashed into the desk by the window. The lamp scooted off the side and broke into pieces on the ground. Thomas assumed Gally would be alone, but he straightened instead, taking everyone in with his mad gaze.

"It can't be saved," he said, his voice now quiet and distant, spooky. "The stupid Maze will kill all you shanks. The Greivers will kill you one every night till it's over. It's better this way." His eyes fell to the floor. "They'll only kill you one a night. Their stupid Variables."

Thomas listened in awe, trying to suppress his fear so he could memorise everything the crazed boy said.

Newt took a step forward. "Gally, shut your bloody hole, there's a Greiver right outside the window. Just sit on your butt and be quiet – maybe it'll go away."

Gally looked up, his eyes narrowing. "You don't get it, Newt. You're too stupid – you've always been too stupid. There's no way out – there's no way to win. They're gonna kill you, all of you – one by one!"

Screaming the last word, Gally threw his body towards the window and started tearing at the wooden boards like a wild animal trying to escape a cage. Before Thomas or anyone else could react, he'd already ripped one board free; he threw it to the ground.

"No!" Newt yelled, running forward. Thomas followed to help, not uttering a word of what was happening.

Gally ripped off the second board just as Newt reached him. He swung it backwards with both hands and connected with Newt's head, sent him sprawling across the bed as a small spray of blood sprinkled the sheets. Thomas padded up short, readying himself for a fight.

"Garry" Thomas yelled. "What're you doing?"

The boy spat on the ground, panting like a winded dog. "You shot your sack face, Thomas. You shot up! I know who you are but I don't care any more. I can only do what's right."

Thomas felt as if his feet were rooted to the ground. He was completely baffled by what Garry was saying. He watched the boy reach back and rip loose the final wooden board. The instant the discarded slab hit the floor of the room, the glass of the window exploded inwards like a swarm of crystal wasps. Thomas covered his face and fell to the floor kicking his legs out to scout his road as far away as possible. When he bumped into the bed, he gathered himself and looked up, reading fate his world coming to an end.

A thieves pulsing, hulking body had squirmed halfway through the destroyed window, metallic arms with pincers snapping and clawing in all directions. Thomas was so terrified, he barely registered that everyone else in the room had fled, the hallway full except Newt who lay unconscious in the bed, frozen. Thomas watched as one of the thieves long arms reached for the lifeless body. That was all it took to break him from his fear. He scrambled to his feet, searched the floor around him for a weapon. As he saw where knives, they could tell him how far he extended, with both arms consumed in him.

Then Garry was speaking again, the thief pulled back its arm as if needed the thing to be able to observe and listen. But its body kept chattering, trying to squeeze its way inside.

"No one ever understood," the boy screamed over the horrible noise of the creature crutching its way deeper into the Homestead, ripping the wall to pieces. "No one ever understood what I saw, what the Changing did to me. Don't go back to the real world Thomas. You *don't want* to remember!"

Garry gave Thomas a long, haunted look, his eyes full of terror, then he turned and disappeared, the writhing body of the

Griever. Thomas yelled out as he watched every extended arm of the monster immediately retract and clasp onto Gally's arms and legs, making escape or rescue impossible. The boy's body sank several centimetres into the creature's squishy flesh, making a horrific squelch ing sound. Then, with surprising speed, the Griever pushed itself back outside the shattered frame of the window and began descending towards the ground below.

Thomas ran to the jagged, gaping hole, looked down just in time to see the Griever land and start scooting across the Glade. Gally's body appearing and disappearing as the thing rolled. The lights of the monster shone brightly, casting an eerie yellow glow across the stone of the open West Door, where the Griever exited into the depths of the Maze. Then, seconds later, several other monsters followed close behind their companion, whirring and clicking as if celebrating their victory.

Thomas was sickened to the verge of throwing up. He began to back away from the window, but something outside caught his eye. He quickly leaned out of the window to get a better look. A lone shape was sprinting across the courtyard of the Glade towards the exit through which Gally had just been taken.

Despite the poor light, Thomas realised who it was immediately. He screamed, yelled at him to stop, but it was too late.

Minho, running full speed, disappeared into the Maze.

CHAPTER 40

Lights blazed throughout the Homestead. Gladers ran about everyone taking a once. A couple of boys cried in a corner. Chaos ruled.

Thomas ignored all of it.

He ran into the adway, then leaped down the stairs three at a time. He pushed his way through a crowd in the foyer, tore out of the Homestead, and towards the West Door sprinting. He pulled up just short of the threshold of the Maze, his instincts forcing him to think twice about entering. Newt called to him from behind, delaying the decision.

"Minho told me to get out there!" Thomas yelled when Newt caught up to him, a small bowl pressed against the wound on his head. A patchy spot of blood had already seeped through the white material.

"I saw," Newt said, pulling the bowl away to peek at it. He grimaced and put it back. "Shuck it, that hurts like a mother. Minho must've finally fried his goddamn brain cells—don't mention Gally. Always knew he was crazy."

Thomas could only worry about Minho. "I'm going after him."

"Time to be a bloody hero again?"

Thomas looked at Newt sharply, hurt by the remark. "You think I do things to impress you shanks? Please. All I care about is getting out of here."

"Yeah, well, you're a regular toughie. But right now we've got worse problems."

"What?" Thomas knew that if he wanted to catch up with Minho he had no time for this.

"Somebody—" Newt began.

"There he is," Thomas shouted. Minho had just turned a corner up ahead and was coming straight for them. Thomas cupped his hands. "What were you doing, idiot?"

Minho waited until he made it back through the Door, then bent over, hands on his knees, and sucked in a few breaths before answering. "I just wanted to make sure."

"Make sure of what?" Newt asked. "Lotta good you'd be taken with Gally."

Minho straightened and put his hands on his hips, still breathing heavily. "Same as boys just wanted to see if they went towards the Cliff. Towards the Greener Hole."

"And?" Thomas said.

"Bingo," Minho wiped sweat from his forehead.

"I just can't believe it," Newt said almost whispering. "What a night."

Thomas's thoughts tried to drift towards the Hole and what it all meant, but he couldn't shake the thought of what Newt had been about to say before they saw Minho return. "What were you about to tell me?" he asked. "You said we had worse—"

"Yeah," Newt patted his thumb over his shoulder. "Yeah, can you see the buggin' smoke?"

Thomas looked in that direction. The heavy metal door of the Map Room was slightly ajar, a wispy trail of black smoke drifting out and into the grey sky.

"Someone burned the Map trunks." Newt said. "Every last one of 'em."

For some reason, Thomas didn't care about the Maps that much - they seemed pointless anyway. He stood outside the window of the Stammer, having left Newt and Minho when they went to investigate the sabotage of the Map Room. Thomas had noticed them exchange an odd look before they had split up, almost as if communicating some secret with their eyes. But Thomas could think of only one thing.

"Teresa?" he asked.

Her face appeared, hands rubbing her eyes. "Was my dad killed," she asked, somewhat groggy.

"Were you asleep?" Thomas asked. He was relieved to see that she appeared okay for the most part.

"I was," she responded. "But I heard something shred the Hamesstead walls. What happened?"

Thomas took his head in disbelief. "Don't know how you could've slept through the sound of a thousand cars over here."

"You try coming out of a coma sometime. See how you do." *Now answer my question*, she said inside his head.

Thomas blinked, momentarily surprised by the voice since she hadn't done so in a while. "What happened?"

"Just tell me what happened."

Thomas sighed. It was such a long story and he didn't feel like telling the whole thing. "You don't know Gray, but he's a psycho kid who ran away. He showed up, jumped on a creeper and he yanked off into the Maze. Was really weird." He still couldn't believe it had actually happened.

"What is saying about?" Teresa said.

"Yeah," he looked behind him, hoping to see A by some where. Sure he told Teresa that now characters were scattered all over the complex, but there was no sign of her reader. He turned back to Teresa. "I just don't get it. Why would the creepers have left after getting Gray? He said something about them killing us one at a night until we were all dead. He

said it at least twice."

Teresa put her hands through the bars, rested her forearms against the concrete and "just one a night? Why?"

"I don't know. He also said I had to do with errors. Or variables. Something like that." Thomas had the same strange urge he'd had the night before—to reach out and take one of her hands. He stopped himself though.

"Tom, I was talking about what you told me I'd said. That the Maze is a code. Being holed up in here does wonders for making the brain do what it was made for."

"What do you think it means?" Intensely interested, he tried to block out the shouts and chatter coming through the Gate as others frantically tried to get out about the Map Room being burned.

"Well, the walls move every day, right?"

"Yeah." He could tell she was really on to something.

"And Minho said they think there's a pattern, right?"

"Right." Gears were starting to shift into place inside Thomas's head, as well as ones as if a prior memory was beginning to break loose.

Well, I can't remember why I said that to you about the code. I know when I was coming out of the coma all sorts of thoughts and memories swirled through my head like crazy, almost as if I could feel someone emptying my mind, sucking them out. And I felt like I needed to say that thing about the code before I lost it. So there must be an important reason."

Thomas almost didn't hear her—he was thinking harder than he had in a while. "They always compare each section's Map to the one from the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that, day by day, each Runner just analysing their own Section. What if they're supposed to compare the Maps to *other* sections?" He trailed off, feeling like he was on the cusp of something.

Teresa seemed to ignore him, doing her own thinking. "The first thing the word *code* makes me think of is letters.

Letters in the alphabet. Maybe the Maze is trying to *spell* something."

Everything came together so quickly in Thomas's mind, he almost heard an audible click, as if the pieces all snapped into place at once. "You're right—you're right! But the Runners have been looking at it wrong this whole time. They've been analysing it the wrong way!"

Teresa gripped the bars now, her knuckles white, her face pressed against the iron rods. "What? What're you talking about?"

Thomas grabbed the two bars outside of where she held on, moved close enough to smell her—a surprisingly pleasant scent of sweat and flowers. "Minno said the patterns repeat themselves, only they can't figure out what it means. But they've always studied them section by section, comparing one day to the next. What if each day is a separate piece of the code, and they're supposed to use all eight sections together somehow?"

"You think maybe each day is trying to reveal a word?" Teresa asked. "With the wall movements?"

Thomas nodded. "Or maybe a letter a day. I don't know. But they've always thought the movements would reveal how to escape, or spell something. They've been studying it like a map, not like a picture—something. We've gotta—" Then he stopped, remembering what he'd just been told by Newt. "Oh, no."

Teresa's eyes flared with worry. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, no, not this, no—" Thomas let go of the bars and stumbled back a step as the realization hit him. He turned to look at the Map Room. The smoke had lessened, but it still walled out the floor—a dark, hazy cloud covering the entire area.

"What's wrong?" Teresa repeated. She couldn't see the Map Room from her angle.

Thomas faced her again. "I didn't think it mattered—" "

"*What?*" she demanded.

"Someone *burned* all the Maps. If there was a code, it's gone."

CHAPTER 41

I'll be back," Thomas said, turning to go. His stomach was full of acid. "I've gotta find Newt, see if any of the Maps survived."

"Wait!" Teresa yelled. "Get me out of here!"

But there was no time, and Thomas felt awful about it. "I can't - I'll be back. I promise." He turned before she could protest and set off at a sprint for the Map Room and its foggy black cloud of smoke. Needles of pain pricked his insides. If Teresa was right, and they'd been that close to figuring out some kind of clue to get out of there, only to see it literally lost in flames... it was so upsetting, it hurt.

The first thing Thomas saw when he ran up was a group of Gladers huddled just outside the large steel door, so that its outer edge blackened with soot. But as he got closer, he realised they were surrounding something on the ground, all of them looking down at it. He spotted Newt, kneeling there in the middle, leaning over a body.

Minho was standing behind him, looking distraught and

dirty, and spotted Thomas first. "Where'd you go?" he asked. "To talk to Teresa - what happened?" He waited anxiously for the next dump of bad news.

Minho's forehead creased in anger. "Oil + Map Room was set on fire and you ran off to talk to your shack girlfriend? What's wrong with you?"

Thomas knew the rebuke should've stung, but his mind was too preoccupied. "I didn't think it mattered any more - if you haven't figured out the Maps by now -"

Minho looked disgusted, the pale light and fog of smoke making his face seem almost sinister. "Yeah, this could be a great freaking time to give up. What the—"

"I'm sorry - just tell me what happened." Thomas leaned over the shoulder of a skinny boy standing in front of him to get a look at the body on the ground.

It was Alby, flat on his back, a huge gash on his forehead. Blood seeped down both sides of his head, some into his eyes, crusting there. Newt was leaning it with a wet rag, gingerly asking questions in a whisper too low to hear. Thomas, concerned for Alby despite his recent ill-tempered ways, turned back to Minho and repeated his question.

"Winston found him out here, half dead, the Map Room blazing. Some shanks got in there and put it out, but way too late. All the trunks are burned to a freaking crisp. I suspected Alby at first, but whoever did it slammed his shack head against the table - you can see where. It's nasty."

"Who do you think did it?" Thomas was hesitant to tell him about the possible discovery he and Teresa had made. With no Maps, the point was moot.

Maybe Gally before he showed up in the Homestead and went psycho? Maybe the Greivers? I don't know, and I don't care. Doesn't matter."

Thomas was surprised at the sudden change of heart. "Now who's the one giving up?"

Minho's head snapped up so quickly Thomas took a step

backwards. There was a flash of anger there, but it quickly melted into an odd expression of surprise or confusion. "That's not what I meant, shank."

Thomas narrowed his eyes in curiosity. "What did?"

"Just shut your hole for now." Minho put his fingers to his lips, his eyes darting around to see if anyone was looking at him. "Just shut your hole. You'll find out soon enough."

Thomas took a deep breath and thought. If he expected the other boys to be honest, he should be honest too. He decided he'd better share about the possible Maze code. Maps or no Maps. "Minho, I need to tell you and Newt something. And we need to let Teresa out—she's probably starving and we could use her help."

"That stupid girl is the last thing I'm worried about."

Thomas ignored the insult. "Just give us a few minutes—we have an idea. Maybe it'll still work if enough Runners remember their Maps."

This seemed to get Minho's full attention—but again, there was that same strange look, as if Thomas was missing something very obvious. "An idea. What?"

"Just come over to the Harmonies with me. You and Newt."

Minho thought for a second. "Newt?" he asked.

"Yeah?" Newt stood up, holding his body rag so find a clear spot. Thomas couldn't help noticing that every centimetre was drenched in red.

Minho pointed down at Abby. "Let the Med-jacks take care of him. We need to talk."

Newt gave him a questioning look, then handed the rag to the Lowest Grader. "Go and find Cato—tell him we've got worse problems than guys with raggin' spacers." When the kid ran off to do as he was told, Newt stepped away from Abby. "Talk about what?"

Minho nodded at Thomas, but didn't say anything.

"Just come with me," Thomas said. Then he turned and headed for the Slammer without waiting for a response.

"Let her out." Thomas stood by the cell door arms folded. "Let her out and then we'll talk. Trust me - you wanna hear it."

Newt was covered in soot and dirt, his hair matted with sweat. He certainly didn't seem to be in a very good mood. "Tommy, this is—"

"Please just open it - let her out. I ease." He wouldn't give up this time.

Minho stood in front of the door with his hands on his hips. "How can we trust her," he asked. "Soon as she woke up the whole place fell to pieces. She even *admitted* she triggered something."

"Hes got a point," Newt said.

Thomas gestured through the door at Teresa. "We can trust her. Every time I've talked to her it's something about trying to get out of here. She was sent here just like the rest of us - its stupid to think she's responsible for any of this."

Newt grinned. "Then what the bloody shock did she mean by sayin' she triggered something?"

Thomas shrugged, refusing to admit it. Newt had a good point. There had to be an explanation. "Who knows - her mom was doing all kinds of weird stuff when she woke up. Maybe we all went through that to the Box taking glibberish before we came really awake - just let her out."

Newt and Minho exchanged a long look.

"Come on," Thomas insisted. "What's she gonna do - run around and slash every Gader to death? Come on."

Minho sighed. "Fine. Just let the stupid girl out."

It was not strange. Teresa shouted, her voice muffled by the walls. "An - I can hear every word you three are saying."

Newt's eyes widened. "Real sweet girl you picked up Tommy."

"Just hurry," Thomas said. "I'm sure we have a lot to do before the Greys come back tonight - if they don't come during the day."

Newt grunted and stepped up to the Slammer, pulling his keys out as he did so. A few clicks later the door swung wide open. "Come on."

Teresa walked out of the small building glowering at Newt as she passed him. She gave a test-as-unpleasant glance towards Minho, then stopped to stand right next to Thomas. Her arm brushed against his, tingles shot across his skin, and he felt mortally embarrassed.

"All right, talk," Minho said. "What's so important?"

Thomas looked at Teresa, wondering how to say it.

"What?" she said. "You talk. They love easily. Think I'm a serial killer."

"Yeah, you look so dangerous," Thomas muttered, but he turned his attention to Newt and Minho. Okay, when Teresa was first coming out of her deep sleep, she had memories flashing through her mind. She said, "He just barely stopped himself from saying she'd said it inside his mind." She told me later that she remembers that the Maze is a *code*. That maybe instead of solving it to find a way out, it's trying to send us a message."

"A code?" Minho asked. "How's it a code?"

Thomas shook his head, wishing he could answer. "I don't know for sure. You're way more familiar with the Maps than I am. But I have a theory. That's why I was hoping you guys could remember some of them."

Minho glanced at Newt, his eyebrows raised in question. Newt nodded.

"What?" Thomas asked, fed up with them keeping information from him. "You guys keep acting like you have a secret."

Minho rubbed his eyes with both hands, took a deep breath. "We had the Maps, Thomas."

At first I didn't compute. "Huh?"

Minho pointed at the Homestead. "We had the freaking Maps in the weapons room, put summaries in their place."

Because of Alby's warning. And because of the so-called *Fucking* your girlfriend triggered."

Thomas was so excited to hear this news he temporarily forgot how awful things had become. He remembered Minho acting suspicious the day before, saying he had a special assignment. Thomas looked over at Newt, who nodded.

"They're all safe and sound," Minho said. "Every last one of those suckers. So if you have a theory, get talking."

"Take me to them," Thomas said, itching to have a look.

"Okay, let's go."

CHAPTER 42

Minho switched on the light, making Thomas squint for a second until his eyes got used to it. Menacing shadows clung to the boxes of weapons scattered across the table and floor, blades and sticks and other nasty-looking devices seeming to wait there, ready to take on a life of their own and kill the first person stupid enough to come close. The dank, musty smell only added to the creepy feel of the room.

"There's a hidden storage cupboard back here," Minho explained, walking past some shelves into a dark corner. "Only a couple of us know about it."

Thomas heard the creak of an old wooden door, and then Minho was dragging a cardboard box across the floor; the scrape of it sounded like a knife on bone. "I put each trunk's worth in its own box; eight boxes total. They're all in there."

"Which one is this?" Thomas asked; he knelt down next to it, eager to get started.

"Just open it and see—each page is marked 'remember!'"

Thomas pulled on the crisscrossed lid flaps until they

popped open. The Maps for Section Two lay in a messy heap. Thomas reached in and pulled out a stack.

"Okay," he said. "The Runners have always compared these day to day, looking to see if there was a pattern that would somehow help figure out a way to an exit. You even said you didn't really know *what* you were looking for, but you kept studying them anyway. Right?"

Minho nodded, arms folded. He looked as if someone were about to reveal the secret of immortality.

"Well," Thomas continued, "what if all the wall movements had nothing to do with a map or a maze or anything like that? What if instead the pattern spelled *words*? Some kind of clue that'll help us escape."

Minho pointed at the Maps in Thomas's hand, letting out a frustrated sigh. "Dude, you have any idea how much we've studied these things? Don't you think we would've noticed if it was spelling out freaking *words*?"

"Maybe it's too hard to see with the naked eye—just comparing one day to the next. And maybe you weren't supposed to compare one day to the next, but look at it one day at a time."

New laughter. "Tommy, I might not be the sharpest guy in the Glade, but sounds like you're talkin' straight out of your butt to me."

While he'd been talking, Thomas's mind had been spinning even faster. The answer was within his grasp—he knew he was a smidge there. It was just so hard to put into words.

"Okay, okay," he said, starting over. "You've always had one Runner assigned to one section, right?"

"Right," Minho replied. "He seemed generally interested and ready to understand."

"And that Runner makes a Map every day, and then compares it to Maps from previous days, for *that* section. What if instead you were supposed to compare the eight sections to *each other* every day. Each day being a separate clue or code? Did you ever compare sections to other sections?"

Minho rubbed his chin nodding. "Yeah, kind of. We tried to see if they made something when put together – of course we did that. We've tried everything."

Thomas pulled his legs up underneath him, studying the Maps in his lap. He could just barely see the lines of the Maze written on the second page through the page resting on top. In that instant, he knew what they had to do. He looked up at the others.

"Wax paper."

"Huh?" Minho asked. "What the—?"

"Just trust me. We need wax paper and scissors. And every black marker and pencil you can find."

Frypan wasn't too happy having a whole box of his wax paper rolls taken away from him, especially with their supplies being cut off. He argued that it was one of the things he always requested, that he used it for baking. They finally had to tell him what they needed – it took to convince him to give it up.

After ten minutes of hunting down pencils and markers most had been in the Map Room and were destroyed in the fire – Thomas sat around the worktable in the weapons basement with Newt, Minho and Teresa. They hadn't found any scissors so Thomas had grabbed the sharpest knife he could find.

"This had better be good," Minho said. Warning,aced his voice, but his eyes showed some interest.

Newt leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table, as if waiting for a magic trick. "Get on with it, Greenie."

"Okay." Thomas was eager to do so, but was also scared to death it might end up being nothing. He handed the knife to Minho, then pointed at the wax paper. "You're cutting rectangles, about the size of the Maps. Newt and Teresa, you can help me grab the first ten or so Maps from each section box."

"What is this klunk a craft time?" Minho held up the knife and looked at it with disgust. "Why don't you just tell us what the klunk were doing this for?"

"I'm done explaining," Thomas said, knowing they just had to see what he was picturing in his mind. He stood up and rummaged through the storage cupboard. "I'll be easier to show you. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong, and we can go back to turning around the Maze like mice."

Minho sighed, clearly irritated, then muttered something under his breath. Teresa had stayed quiet for a while, but she spoke up inside Thomas' head.

I think I know what you're doing. Brilliant, actually.

Thomas was startled, but he tried his best to cover it up. He knew he had to pretend he didn't have voices in his head—the others would think he was a lunatic.

Just come over and help me, he tried to say back, thinking each would separately try to validate the message sent. But she didn't respond.

"Teresa!" he said aloud. "Can you help me a second?" He nodded towards the cupboard.

The two of them went in, he dusty the room and opened up all the boxes, grabbing a stack of Maps from each one. Running to the cave, Thomas found that Minho had a tweny sheets already, making a messy pile to his right as he threw each new piece on top.

Thomas sat down and grabbed a few. He held one of the papers up to the light, saw how it shone through with a tiny glow. It was exactly what he needed.

He grabbed a marker. "Alright, everybody, trace the last ten or so days on a piece of this stuff. Make sure you write the date on top so we can keep track of what's what. When we're done, I think we might see something."

"What—?" Minho began.

Just bloody keep cutting. Newt ordered. "I think we know where he's going with this," Thomas was relieved someone was finally getting it.

They got to work, tracing from original Maps to wax paper one by one, trying to keep it clean and correct while working.

as fast as possible. Thomas used the side of a stray slab of wood as a makeshift ruler, keeping his lines straight. Soon he'd completed five maps, then five more. The others kept the same pace, working feverishly.

As Thomas drew, he started to feel a tickle of panic, a sick feeling that what they were doing was a complete waste of time. But Teresa, sitting next to him, was a study in concentration, her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth as she traced lines up and down, side to side. She seemed way more confident that they were definitely on to something.

Box by box, section by section, they continued on.

"I've had enough," Newt finally announced, breaking the quiet. "My fingers are bloody burning like a mother. See if it's working."

Thomas put his marker down, then flexed his fingers, hoping he'd been right about all this. "Okay, give me the last few days of each section – make piles along the table, in order from Section One to Section Eight. One here," he pointed at an end, "to Eight here." He pointed at the other end.

Silently, they did as he asked, sorting through what they'd traced until eight low stacks of wax paper lined the table.

Hesitant and nervous, Thomas picked up one page from each pile, making sure they were all from the same day, keeping them in order. He then laid them one on top of the other so that each drawing of the Maze matched the same day above it and below it, until he was looking at eight different sections of the Maze at once. What he saw amazed him. Almost magically, like a picture coming into focus, an image developed. Teresa let out a small gasp.

Lines crossed each other up and down, so much so that what Thomas held in his hands looked like a chequered grid. But certain lines in the middle – lines that happened to appear more often than any other – made a slightly darker image than the rest. It was subtle, but it was, without a doubt, there.

Sitting in the exact centre of the page was the letter *F*.

CHAPTER 43

Thomas felt a rush of different emotions: relief that it had worked, surprise, excitement, wonder at what it could lead to.

"Man," Martin said, summing up Thomass' feelings with one word.

"Could be a coincidence," Teresa said. "Do more, quick."

Thomas did, pasting together the eight pages on each day in order from Section One to Section Eight. Each time, an obvious letter popped in the centre of the crisscrossed mass of lines. After the *E* was an *L*, then an *O*, then an *A*, and a *T*. Then *E* . . . *A* . . . *T*.

"Look!" Thomas said, pushing down the line of stacks they'd formed, confused but happy that the letters were so obvious. "It spells *EALAT* and then it spells *CAT*."

"Float cat?" Newt asked. "Doesn't sound like a handy rescue code to me."

"We just need to keep working," Thomas said.

Another couple of combinations made them realise that the

second word was actually *CATCH HIGAL* and *CATCH*

"Definitely not a coincidence " Minho said

"Definitely not." Thomas agreed. He couldn't wait to see more.

Teresa gestured towards the storage cupboard. "We need to go through all of them - all those boxes in there."

"Yeah." Thomas nodded. "Let's get on it."

"We can't help," Minho said.

All three of them looked at him. He returned their stares. "At least not me and Thomas here. We need to get the Runners out in the Maze."

"What?" Thomas asked. "This is way more important!"

"Maybe," Minho answered calmly. "but we can't miss a day out there. Not now."

Thomas felt a rush of disappointment. Running the Maze seemed like such a waste of time compared to figuring out the code. "Why Minho? You said the patterns has early been repeating itself for months - one more day won't mean a thing."

Minho slammed his hand against the table. "That's bullcrap, Thomas! Of all days, this might be the most important to get out there. Something might've changed, something might've opened up. In fact, with the freaking walls not closing any more, I think we should try your idea - stay out there overnight and do some deeper exploring."

That piqued Thomas's interest - he *had* been wanting to do that. Conflicted, he asked, "But what about this code? What about—?"

"Forget it," Newt said in a consoling voice. "Minho's right. You snakes go out and get Runner. I'll find up some Gladders we can trust and get working on this." Newt sounded more like a leader than ever before.

"Me too," Teresa agreed. "I'll stay and help Newt."

Thomas looked at her. "You sure?" He was itching to figure out the code himself, but he decided Minho and Newt were right.

She smiled and held her arms. "If you're going to decipher a hidden code from a complex set of different mazes, I'm pretty sure you need a guy with a brain running the show." Her grin turned into a smirk.

"If you say so." He folded his own arms, staring at her with a smile suddenly not wanting to leave again.

"Good that." Mr. He nodded and turned to go. "Every thing's fine and dandy. Come on." He started towards the door but stopped when he realised Thomas wasn't behind him.

"Don't worry, Thomas." Newt said. "Your girlfriend will be fine."

Thomas felt a million thoughts go through his head in that moment. As much as earn the code, embarrassment at what Newt thought of him and Teresa, the intrigue of what they might find out in the Maze – and fear.

But he pushed it all aside. Without even saying goodbye, he finally allowed Mr. He and they went up the stairs.

Thomas helped Mr. He gather the banners to give them the news and organise them for the big journey. He was surprised at how readily everyone agreed that it was time to do some more in-depth exploring of the Maze and stay out there overnight. Even though he was nervous and scared, he told Mr. He he could take one of the sections himself, but the Keeper refused. They had eight experienced Runners to do that. Thomas was to go with them – which made Thomas so relieved he was almost ashamed of himself.

He and Mr. He packed their trunks with more supplies than usual, there was no telling how long they'd be out there. Despite his fear, Thomas couldn't help being excited as well – maybe this was the day they'd find an exit.

He and Mr. He were stretching their legs by the West Door when Chuck walked over to say goodbye.

"To go with you," the boy said in a far too jovial voice, "but I don't wanna die a gruesome death."

Thomas laughed, surprising himself. "Thanks for the words of encouragement."

"Be careful," Chuck said, his tone quickly moving into genuine concern. "I wish, I wish, I wish he p you guys."

Thomas was touched. He bet that if it really came down to it, Chuck *would* go out there if he were asked to. "Thanks, Chuck. We'll definitely be careful."

Minho grunted. "Being careful hasn't got us square, it's all or nothing now, baby."

"We better get going," Thomas said. Butterflies swarmed in his gut, and he just wanted to *move*, to quit thinking about it. After all, going out in the Maze was no worse than staying in the Glade with open Doors. I thought the thought did not make him feel much better.

"Yeah," Minho responded evenly. "Let's go."

"Well," Chuck said, looking down at his feet before returning his gaze to Thomas. "Good luck. If your girlfriend gets lonely for you, I'll give her some love."

Thomas rolled his eyes. "She's not my girlfriend, shut up, face."

"Wow," Chuck said. "You're already using A by's dirty words." He was obviously trying hard to pretend he wasn't scared of all the recent developments, but his eyes revealed the truth. "Seriously, good luck."

"Thanks, that means a lot," Minho answered with his own eye roll. "See ya, shank."

"Yeah, see ya," Chuck muttered, then turned to walk away.

Thomas felt a pang of sadness. It was possible he might never see Chuck or Teresa or any of them again. A sudden urge gripped him. "Don't forget my promise!" he yelled. "I'll get you home!"

Chuck turned and gave him a thumbs-up; his eyes glistened with tears.

Thomas flipped up double thumbs, then he and Minho pulled on their rucksacks and entered the Maze.

CHAPTER 44

Thomas and Minho didn't stop until they were halfway to the last dead end of Section Eight. They made good time. Thomas was glad for his wristwatch, with the skies being grey, because it quickly became obvious that he wasn't hadn't moved from the day before. Everything was exactly the same. There was no need for Map-making or taking notes; the main task was to get to the end and start making their way back, searching for bugs previously announced. Anything Minho allowed a twenty-minute break and then they were back at it.

They were silent as they ran. Minho had taught Thomas that speaking only wasted energy, so he concentrated on his pace and his breaths. Regular. Even. In. out. In. out. Deeper and deeper into the Maze they went, with only their thoughts and the sounds of their feet thumping against the hard stone floor.

If the hard-hat interest surprised him, speaking in his mind came back in the Glade.

We're making progress. Found a couple more words already.

But none of it makes sense yet

Thomas's first instinct was to ignore her, to deny once again that someone had the ability to enter his mind, invade his privacy. But he *wanted* to talk to her.

Can you hear me? he asked, picturing the words in his mind mentally throwing them out to her in some way he could never have explained. Concentrating, he said it again. *Can you hear me?*

Yes! she replied. *Really clearly the second time you said it.*

Thomas was shocked. So shocked, he almost quit running. It had worked.

Wonder why we can do this, he called out with his mind. The mental effort of speaking to her was already screaming. He felt a headache forming like a bulge in his brain.

Maybe we were twins, Teresa said.

Thomas tripped and crashed to the ground, smiling sheepishly at Minto, who'd turned to look without slowing. Thomas got back up almost laughingly at him. *What?* he finally asked.

He sensed a laugh from her, a wary image too of concern. *This is so bizarre,* she said. *I think you're a stranger, but I know you're not.*

Thomas felt a pleasant chill even though he was sweating. *Sorry to break it to you, but we are strangers. I've only just met you, remember?*

Don't be stupid, Tom. I think someone altered our brains, put something in there so we could do this telepathy thing. Before we came here. That makes me think we already knew each other.

It was something he'd wondered about, and he thought she was probably right. Hoped it anyway. He was really starting to like her. *Brains altered?* he asked. *How?*

I don't know - some memory I can't quite grasp. I think we did something big.

Thomas thought about how he'd always felt a connection to her, ever since she arrived in the Glade. He wanted to dig a little more and see what she saw. *What are you talking about?*

Well, I know. I'm just trying to bounce ideas off you to see if it sparks anything in your mind

Thomas thought about what Gailv, Ben and Alby had said about him—their suspicions that he was against them somehow—was someone not to trust. He thought about what Teresa had said to him, too, the very first time—that he and she had somehow done all of this to them.

This code has to mean something, she added. And the thing I wrote on my arm—WICKED is good.

Maybe it won't matter, he answered. Maybe we'll find an exit. You never know.

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut for a few seconds as he ran, trying to concentrate. A pocket of air seemed to float in his chest every time they spoke—a swelling that half annoyed and half thrilled him. His eyes popped back open when he realised she could maybe read his thoughts even when he wasn't trying to communicate. He waited for a response, but none came.

You still there? he asked.

Yeah, but this always gives me a headache

Thomas was relieved to hear he wasn't the only one. *My head hurts, too*

Okay, she said. See you later

No, wait! He didn't want her to leave: she was helping the time pass. Making the running easier somehow.

Bye. Turn it a let you know if we figure anything out

Teresa—what about the thing you wrote on your arm?

Several seconds passed. No reply.

Teresa?

She was gone. Thomas felt as if that bubble of air in his chest had burst, releasing toxins into his body. His stomach hurt, and the thought of running the rest of the day suddenly depressed him.

In some ways, he wanted to tell M who about how he and Teresa could talk, to share what was happening before it made

his brain explode. But he didn't dare. Throwing telepathy into the whole situation didn't seem like the grandest of ideas. Everything was weird enough already.

Thomas put his head down and drew in a long, deep breath. He would just keep his mouth shut and run.

Two breaths later, Minho finally slowed to a walk as they headed down a long corridor that ended in a wall. He stopped and took a seat against the dead end. The ivy was especially thick here. It made the world seem green and lush, hiding the hard, impenetrable stone.

Thomas joined him on the ground and they attacked their modest lunch of sandwiches and sliced fruit.

"This is it," Minho said after his second bite. "We've already run through the whole section. Surprise surprise." He exhaled.

Thomas already knew this, but hearing it made his heart sink even lower. Without another word— from himself or Minho—he finished his food and readied himself to explore. To look for who-knew-what.

For the next few hours, he and Minho scoured the ground floor along the walls, climbed up the ivy in random spots. They found nothing, and Thomas grew more and more discouraged. The only thing interesting was another one of those odd signs that read *World in Catastrophe—K1 Zone Experiment Department*. Minho didn't ever give it a second glance.

They had another meal, searched some more. They found nothing, and Thomas was beginning to get ready to sleep. He knew in his heart there was nothing to find. When waking time rolled around, he started looking for signs, but never was struck by a tiny hesitation at every corner. He and Minho always had knives clasped firmly in both hands. But nothing showed up until almost midnight.

Minho spotted a Griever disappearing around a corner ahead of them, and it didn't come back. Thirty minutes later, Thomas saw one do the exact same thing. An hour after that, a Griever came charging through the Maze right past them, not

even passing. Thomas almost collapsed from the sudden rush of terror.

He and Minho continued on.

"I think they're playing with us," Minho said a while later.

Thomas realised he'd given up on searching the walls and was just heading back towards the Glade in a depressed walk. From the looks of it, Minho felt the same way.

"What do you mean?" Thomas asked.

The Keeper sighed. "I think the Creators want us to know there's no way out. The walls aren't even moving any more – it's like this has all just been some stupid game and it's time to end. And they want us to go back and tell the other volunteers. How much do you wanna bet when we get back we find out a Griever took one of them just like last night. I think Gally was right – they're gonna just keep leading us."

Thomas didn't respond. He felt the truth of what Minho said. Any hope he'd felt earlier when they'd set out had crashed a long time ago.

"Let's just go home," Minho said, his voice weary.

Thomas hated to admit defeat, but he nodded in agreement. The code seemed like their only hope now, and he resolved to focus on that.

He and Minho made their way silently back to the Glade. They didn't see another Griever the whole way.

CHAPTER 45

By Thomas's watch, it was mid-morning when he and Minto stepped through the West Door back into the Glade. Thomas was so tired he wanted to lie down right there and take a nap. They'd been in the Maze for roughly twenty-four hours.

Surprisingly, despite the dead night and everything falling apart, the day in the Glade appeared to be proceeding business as usual: farming, gardening, cleaning. It didn't take long for some of the boys to notice them standing there. Newt was notified and he came running.

"You're the first to come back," he said as he walked up to them. "What happened?" The childlike look of hope on his face broke Thomas's heart—he obviously thought they'd found something important. "Tell me you've got good news."

Minto's eyes were dead, staring at a spot somewhere in the grey distance. "Nothing," he said. "The Maze is a big freaking joke."

Newt looked at Thomas, confused. "What's he talking about?"

"He's just discouraged." Thomas said with a weary shrug. "We didn't find anything different. The walls haven't moved, no exits, nothing. Did the Grievors come last night?"

Newt paled, darkness passing over his face. Finally, he nodded. "Yeah. They took Adam."

Thomas didn't know the name, and felt giddy for feeling nothing *just one person again*, he thought. *Maybe Cully was right.*

Newt was about to say something else when Minho freaked out, startling Thomas.

"I'm sick of this!" Minho spat, in the ivy veins popping out of his neck. "I'm sick of it! It's over! It's all over!" He took off his rucksack and threw it on the ground. "There's no exit, never was, never will be. We're all stucked."

Thomas watched his throat dry, as Minho stomped off towards the Homestead. It worried him. If Minho gave up, they were all in big trouble.

Newt didn't say a word. He left Thomas standing there, now in his own daze. Despair hung in the air, like the smoke from the Map Room, thick and acrid.

The other Runners returned within the hour, and from what Thomas heard, none of them had found anything, and they'd even *admittedly* given up as well. Gloom filled the Glade, and most of the workers had abandoned their daily jobs.

Thomas knew that the code of the Maze was their only hope now. It had to reveal something, it had to. And after aimlessly wandering the Glade to hear the other Runners' stories, he snapped out of his funk.

Teresa? he said in his mind, closing his eyes, as if that would do the trick. *Where are you. Did you figure anything out?*

After a long pause, he almost gave up, thinking it didn't work.

Huh? Turn, did you say something?

Yeah, he said, excited he'd made contact again. *Can you hear*

me. Am I doing the thing right?

Sometimes it's choppy, but it's working. Kinda freaky, huh?

Thomas thought about that. Actually, he was sort of getting used to it. It's not so bad. Are you guys still in the basement? I saw Newt but then he disappeared again.

Still here. Newt had three or four Gladers help us trace the Maps. I think we have the code all figured out.

Thomas's heart leaped into his throat. "Seriously?"

Get down here.

I'm coming. He was already moving as he said it, somehow not feeling so exhausted any more.

Newt let him in.

"Mithostul hasn't shown up," he said as they walked down the stairs to the basement. "Sometimes he turns into a bugger's forehead."

Thomas was surprised Mithostul was wasting time talking, especially with the code possibilities. He pushed the thought aside as he entered the room. Several Gladers he didn't know were gathered around the table, standing; they all looked exhausted, their eyes sunken. Piles of Maps lay scattered all over the place, including the floor. It looked as if a tornado had touched down right in the middle of the room.

Teresa was leaning against a stack of shelves, reading a single sheet of paper. She glanced up when he entered, but then returned her gaze to whatever it was she held. This saddened him a little—he'd hoped she'd be happy to see him—but then he felt really stupid for even having the thought. She was obviously busy figuring out the code.

You have to see this, Teresa said to him, as Newt dismissed his helpers—they clomped up the wooden stairs, a couple of them grumbling about doing all that work for nothing.

Thomas started, for a brief moment worried that Newt could read what was going on. *Don't talk in my head while Newt's*

around. I don't want him knowing about our gift.

"Come and check this out," she said aloud, barely hiding the smirk that flashed across her face.

"I'll get down on my knees and kiss your bloody feet if you can figure it out," Newt said.

Thomas walked over to Teresa, eager to see what they'd come up with. She held out the paper, eyebrows raised.

"No doubt this is right," she said. "Just don't have a clue what it means."

Thomas took the paper and scanned it quickly. There were numbered circles running down the left side, one to six. Next to each one was a word written in big blocky letters.

FLOAT
CATCH
BLEED
DEATH
STIFF
PUSH

That was it. Six words.

Disappointment washed over Thomas. He'd been sure the purpose of the code would be obvious once they had it figured out. He looked up at Teresa with a sunken heart. "That's all? Are you sure they're in the right order?"

She took the paper back from him. "The Maze has been repeating those words for months. We finally got when that became clear. Each time, after the word *PUSH*, it goes a full week without showing any letter at all, and then it starts over again with *FLOAT*. So we figured that's the first word, and that's the order."

Thomas folded his arms and leaned against the shelves next to Teresa. Without thinking about it, he'd memorised the six words, wedged them to his mind: *Float Catch Bleed Death Stiff Push*. That didn't sound good.

"Cheerful, don't ya think?" Newt said, trying to get his thoughts exactly

"Yeah." Thomas replied with a frustrated groan. "We need to get Minhó down here—maybe he knows something we don't. If we just had more clues—" He froze, hit by a dizzy spell; he would've fallen to the floor if he hadn't had the shelves to lean on. An idea had just occurred to him. A horrible, terrible, awful idea. The worst idea in the history of horrible, terrible, awful ideas.

But instinct told him he was right. That it was something he had to do.

"Tommy?" Newt asked, stepping closer with a look of concern creasing his forehead. "What's wrong with you? Your face— it's went as white as a ghost."

Thomas shook his head, composing himself. "Oh nothing, sorry. My eyes are hurting. I think I need some sleep." He rubbed his temples for effect.

Are you okay? Teresa asked in his mind. He looked to see that she was as worried as Newt, which made him feel good.

Yeah. Seriously, I'm tired. I just need some rest.

"Well—" Newt said, reaching out to squeeze Thomas's shoulder. "You spent all bloody night out in the Maze—go take a nap."

Thomas looked at Teresa, then at Newt. He wanted to share his idea, but decided against it. Instead, he just nodded and headed for the stairs.

At the same time, Thomas now had a plan. As bad as it was, he had a plan.

They needed more clues about the code. They needed *memories*.

So he was going to get stung by a Creeper. Go through the Changing. On purpose.

CHAPTER 46

Thomas refused to talk to anyone the rest of the day. Teresa tried several times. But he kept telling her he didn't feel good, that he just wanted to be alone and sleep in his spot behind the forest, maybe spend some time thinking. Try to discover a hidden secret within his mind that would help them know what to do.

But in truth, he was psyching himself up for what he had planned for that evening, convincing himself it was the right thing to do. The *only* thing to do. Plus, he was absolutely terrified and he didn't want the others to notice.

Eventually, when his watch showed that evening had arrived, he went to the fire nest with everyone else. He barely noticed he'd been hungry until he started eating Frypan's hastily prepared meal of biscuits and tomato soup.

And then it was time for another sleepless night.

The Borders had boarded up the gaping holes left by the monsters who'd carried off Galy and Adam. The end result looked to Thomas like an army of drunk guys had done the

work, but it was soon enough. Newt and Abby, who finally felt well enough to walk around again, his head heavily bandaged, insisted on a plan for everyone to rotate where they slept each night.

Thomas ended up in the large living room on the bottom floor of the Homestead with the same people he'd slept with two nights before. Silence settled over the room quickly, though he didn't know if it was because people were actually asleep or just scared, quietly hoping against hope that the Grievors didn't come again. Unlike two nights ago, Teresa was allowed to stay in the building with the rest of the Gladers. She was near him, curled up in two blankets. Somehow he could sense that she was sleeping. *Actually sleeping.*

Thomas certainly couldn't sleep, even though he knew his body needed it desperately. He tried—he tried so hard to keep his eyes closed, force himself to relax. But he had no luck. The night dragged on, the heavy sense of anticipation like a weight on his chest.

Then, just as they'd all expected, came the mechanical, faint sounds of the Grievors outside. The time had come.

Everyone crowded together against the wall farthest from the windows, doing their best to keep quiet. Thomas huddled in a corner next to Teresa, hugging his knees, staring at the window. The reality of the dreadful decision he'd made earlier squeezed his heart like a crushing fist. But he knew that everything might depend on it.

The tension in the room rose at a steady pace. The Gladers were quiet; not a soul moved. A distant scraping of metal against wood echoed through the house—it sounded to Thomas like a Griever was climbing in the back side of the Homestead, opposite where they were. More noises joined in a few seconds later, coming from all directions, the closest right outside their own window. The air in the room seemed to freeze into solid ice, and Thomas pressed his fists against his eyes, the anticipation of the attack killing him.

A booming explosion of ripping wood and broken glass thundered from somewhere upstairs shaking the whole house. Thomas went numb as several screams erupted followed by the pounding of fleeing footsteps. Loud creaks and groans announced a whole horde of Griefers running to the first floor.

"I's got Dave!" someone yelled. The voice hitched with terror.

No one in Thomas's room moved a muscle: he knew each of them was probably feeling guilty about the relief. But at least it wasn't them. That maybe they were safe for one more night. Two nights in a row only one day had been taken, and people had started to believe that what Gally had said was true.

Thomas jumped as a terrible crash sounded right outside their door, accompanied by screams and the splintering of wood. Like some iron-jawed monster was eating the entire stairwell. A second later came another explosion of ripping wood, the front door. The Griever had come right through the house and was now leaving.

An explosion of fear ripped through Thomas. It was now or never.

He jumped up and ran to the door of the room, yanking it open. He heard Newt yell, but he ignored him and ran down the hall, sidestepping and jumping over hundreds of splintered pieces of wood. He could see that where the front door had been there now stood a jagged hole, eating it into the grey night. He headed straight for it and ran out into the Glade.

Tom! Teresa screamed in his direction. *What are you doing?*

He ignored her. He was kept running.

The Griever holding Dave – a kid Thomas had never spoken to – was rolling along on its spikes towards the West Door, chattering and whirring. The other Griefers had already gathered in the courtyard and followed their companion towards the Maze. Without hesitating, knowing the others would think he was trying to corner his uncle, Thomas sprinted in the other direction until he found himself in the middle of the

pack of creatures. Having been taken by surprise, the Gnevers hesitated.

Thomas jumped on the one holding Dave, tried to jerk the kid free, hoping the creature would retaliate. Teresa's scream inside his mind was so loud, it felt as if a dagger had been driven through his skull.

Three of the Gnevers swarmed on him at once, their long pincers and claspers and needles flying in from all directions. Thomas flailed his arms and legs, knocking away the horrible metallic arms as he kicked at the pulsating babbler of the Gnevers' bodies. He only wanted to be stung, not taken like Dave. Their relentless attack intensified and Thomas fell apart, erupting over every bit of his body—needle pricks that told him he'd succeeded. Screaming, he kicked and pushed and thrashed, throwing his body into a roll, trying to get away from them. Struggling, bursting with adrenaline, he finally found an open spot, got his feet under him and ran with all his power.

As soon as he escaped the immediate reach of the Gnevers' instruments, they gave up and retreated, disappearing into the Maze. Thomas collapsed to the ground, groaning from the pain.

Newt was on him in a second, followed immediately by Chuck. Teresa, several others. Newt grabbed him by the shoulders and lifted him up, gripping him under both arms. "Get his legs!" he yelled.

Thomas felt the world swimming around him, felt dizzy, nauseated. Someone, he couldn't recall who, obeyed Newt's order; he was being carried across the courtyard, through the front door of the Homestead, down the shattered hallway, a room placed on a couch. The world continued to twist and pitch.

"What were you *doing*?" Newt yelled in his face. "How could you be so bloody stupid?"

Thomas had to speak before he faded into unconsciousness. "No, Newt . . . you don't understand. . . ."

"Shut up!" Newt shouted "Don't waste your energy!"

Thomas felt someone is examining his arms and legs, ripping his clothes away from his body, checking for damage. He heard Chuck's voice, couldn't help feeling relief that his friend was okay. A Med-jack said something about him being stung dozens of times.

Leresa was by his feet, squeezing his right ankle with her hand. *Why, Tom? Why would you do that?*

Because . . . He didn't have the strength to concentrate.

Newt yelled for the Gr of Serani, a minute later Thomas felt a pinprick in his arm. Warmth spread from that point throughout his body, calming him, lessening the pain. But the world still seemed to be collapsing in on itself, and he knew it would all be gone from him in just a few seconds.

The room spun, counts morphing into each other, churning faster and faster, at took all of his effort, but he said one last thing before the darkness took him for good.

"Don't worry," he whispered, hoping they could hear him. "I did it on purpose . . ."

CHAPTER 47

Thomas had no concept of time as he went through the Changing.

It started much like his first memory of the Box – dark and cold. But this time he had no sensation of anything touching his feet or body. He floated in emptiness, stared into a void of black. He saw nothing, heard nothing, smelled nothing. It was as if someone had severed his five senses, leaving him in a vacuum.

Time stretched on. And on. Fear turned into curiosity which turned into boredom.

Finally, after an interminable wait, things began to change.

A distant wind picked up, unheard but heard. Then a swirling mist of whiteness appeared far to the distance – a spiraling tornado of smoke that formed into a long funnel, stretching out until he could see neither the top nor the bottom of the white whirlwind. He felt the gales then, sucking into the cyclone so that it blew past him from behind, ripping at his clothes and hair like they were shredded flags caught in a storm.

The power of thick mist began to move towards him, or he was moving towards it, he couldn't tell, increasing its speed at an alarming rate. Where seconds before he'd been able to see the distinct form of the house, he now could see only a flat expanse of white.

And then it consumed him, he felt his mind taken by the mist, felt memories flood in to his thoughts.

Everything else turned into pain.

CHAPTER 48

"Thomas."

The voice was distant, warbled, like an echo in a long tunnel.

"Thomas, can you hear me?"

He didn't want to answer. His mind had shut down when it could no longer take the pain, he feared it would all return if he allowed himself back into consciousness. He sensed light on the other side of his eyelids, but knew it would be unbearable to open them. He did nothing.

"Thomas, it's Chuck. Are you okay? Please don't die, dude."

Everything came crashing back into his mind. The Grade, the Greivers, the stinging needle, the Changing, *Memories*. The Maze couldn't be solved. Their only way out was something they'd never expected. Something terrifying. He was crushed with despair.

Groaning, he forced his eyes open, squinting at first. Chuck's pudgy face was there, staring with frightened eyes. But then they lit up and a smile spread across his face. Despite it all

despite the terrible crappiness of it all. Chuck smiled.

"He's awake!" the boy yelled to no one in particular.
"Thomas is awake!"

The booming sound of his voice made Thomas wince; he shut his eyes again. "Chuck, do you have to scream. I don't feel so good."

"Sorry. I'm just glad you're alive. You're lucky I don't give you a big loss."

"Please don't do that, Chuck." Thomas opened his eyes again and forced himself to sit up in the bed in which he lay, pushing his back against the wall and stretching out his legs. Soreness ate at his joints and muscles. "How long did it take?" he asked.

"Three days." Chuck answered. "We put you in the Slammer at night to keep you safe. Brought you back here during the days. Thought you were dead for sure about thirty times since you started. But check you out. You look brand new."

Thomas could only imagine how *non-great* he looked. "Did the Grievors come?"

Chuck's vibration visibly crashed to the ground as his eyes sank down towards the floor. "Yeah - they got Zart and a couple of others. One a night. Minus and the Runners have scoured the Maze, trying to find an exit or some use for that stupid code you guys came up with. But nothing. Why do you think the Grievors are only taking one shank at a time?"

Thomas's stomach turned sour - he knew the exact answer to that question, and some others, too. Enough to know that sometimes knowing sucked.

"Get Newt and Abby," he finally said in answer. "Tell them we need to have a Gathering. Soon as possible."

"Serious?"

Thomas let out a sigh. "Chuck, I've just gone through the Changing. Do *you* think I'm serious?"

Without a word, Chuck jumped up and ran out of the

room, his calls for Newt fading the farther he went.

Thomas closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall. Then he called out to her with his mind.

Teresa.

She didn't answer at first, but then her voice popped into his thoughts as clearly as if she were sitting next to him. *That was really stupid, Tom. Really, really stupid.*

Had to do it, he answered.

I pretty much hated you the last couple of days. You should've seen yourself. Your skin, your veins.

You hated me? He was thrilled she'd cared so much about him.

She paused. *That's just my way of saying I would've killed you if you'd died.*

Thomas felt a burst of warmth in his chest, reached up and suddenly touched it, surprised at himself. *Well, thanks, I guess.*

So, how much do you remember?

He paused. *Enough.*

What you said about the time of us died, what we did to them. It was true?

We did some bad things, Teresa. He sensed frustration from her. *Like we had a million questions and no idea where to start.*

Did you learn anything to help us get out of here? she asked, as if she didn't want to know what part she'd had in all of this. *A purpose for the ride?*

Thomas paused, not really wanting to talk about it yet, not before he really gathered his thoughts. The only chance for escape might be a death wish. *Maybe,* he finally said, *but it won't be easy. We need a Gathering. To ask for you to be there. I don't have the energy to say it all twice.*

Neither one of them said anything for a while, a sense of hopelessness waiting between their minds.

Teresa?

Yeah?

The Maze can't be solved.

She paused for a long time before answering. *I think we all know that now.*

Thomas hated the pain in her voice. He could feel it in his mind. *Don't worry; the Creator meant for us to escape, though. I have a plan.* He wanted to give her some hope, no matter how scarce.

Oh, really?

Yeah. It's terrible, and some of us might die. Sound promising? Big-time. What is it?

We have to—

Before he could finish, Newt walked into the room, cutting him off.

I'll tell you later, Thomas quickly finished.

Hurry! she said, then was gone.

Newt had walked over to the bed and sat down next to him. "Tommy—you barely look sick."

Thomas nodded. "I feel a little queasy, but other than that, I'm fine. Thoughts could be a lot worse."

Newt shook his head, his face a mixture of anger and awe. "What you did was half brave and half bloody stupid. Seen's like you're pretty good at that." He paused, shook his head. "I know why you did it. What memories came back. Anything that'll help?"

"We need to have a Ca'hering," Thomas said, shifting his legs to get more comfortable. Surprisingly, he didn't feel much pain, just weariness. "Before I start forgetting some of this stuff."

"Yeah. Chuck told me—we do it. But why? What'd you figure out?"

"It's a test. Newt—the whole thing is a test."

Newt nodded. "Like an experiment."

Thomas shook his head. "No, you don't get it. They're weeding us out, seeing if we'll give up, finding the best of us. Throwing variables at us, trying to make us quit. Testing our ability to hope and fight. Sending Teresa here and shunning

everything down was only the last part. one more final analysis. Now its time for the last test. To escape "

News grew crinkled in confusion "What do you mean You know a way out?"

"Yeah. Call the Gathering Now "

CHAPTER 49

An hour later, Thomas sat in front of the Keepers for the Gathering, just like he had a week or two before. They hadn't let Teresa in, which ticked him off just as much as it did her. Newt and Minho trusted her now, but the others still had their doubts.

"All right, Greene," Aibby said, looking much better as he sat in the middle of the semicircle of chairs, next to Newt. The other chairs were all occupied except two – a stark reminder that Zart and Gally had been taken by the Grievers. "Forget all the beat around the bush klunk. Start talking."

Thomas said a bit queasy from the Changing, forced himself to take a second and gain his composure. He had a lot to say, but wanted to be sure it came out sounding as non-stupid as possible.

"It's a long story," he began. "We don't have time to go through it all, but I'll tell you the gist of it. When I went through the Changing, I saw flashes of images – hundreds of them – like a slide show in fast forward. A lot came back to me

but only some of it's clear enough to talk about. Other stuff has faded or is fading." He paused, gathering his thoughts one last time. "But I remember enough. The Creators are testing us. The Maze was never meant to be solved. It's all been a trial. They want the winners -- or survivors -- to do something important." He trailed off, already confused at what order he should tell things in.

"What?" Newt asked.

"Let me start again," Thomas said, rubbing his eyes. "Every single one of us was taken when we were really young. I don't remember how or why -- just glimpses and feelings that things had changed, in the worst way, that something really had happened. I have no idea what The Creators stole us, and I think they felt justified in doing it. Somehow they figured out that we have above-average intelligence, and that's why they chose us. I don't know most of this -- it's sketchy and doesn't matter that much anyway."

"I can't remember anything about my family or what happened to them. But after we were taken, we spent the next few years learning in special schools, living somewhat normal lives until they were finally able to finance and build the Maze. All our names are just stupid nicknames they made up. Like Alby for Albert Einstein, Newt for Isaac Newton, and me -- Thomas. As in Edison."

Alby looked like he'd been slapped in the face. "Our names -- these aren't even our real names?"

Thomas shook his head. "As far as I can tell, we'll probably never know what our names were."

"What are you saying?" Prypan asked. "That we're freakin' orphans raised by scientists?"

"Yes," Thomas said, hoping his expression didn't give away just how depressed he felt. "Supposedly we're really smart and they're studying every move we make, analysing us. Seeing who'd give up and who wouldn't. Seeing who'd survive it all. No wonder we have so many beetle blade spies running around

this place. Plus some of us have had things altered in our brains."

"I believe this kink about as much as I believe Frypan's food is good for you," Winston grumbled, looking tired and indifferent.

"Why would I make this up?" Thomas said, his voice rising. He'd got stung on *purpose* to remember these things. "Better yet, what do *you* think is the explanation? That we live on an alien planet?"

"Just keep talking," Abby said. "But I don't get why none of us remembered this stuff. I've been through the Changing, but everything I saw was . . ." He looked around quickly, like he'd just said something he shouldn't have. "I didn't learn much."

"I'll tell you in a minute why I think I learned more than others," Thomas said, dreading that part of the story. "Should I keep going or not?"

"Talk," Newt said.

Thomas sucked in a big breath, as if he were about to start a race. "Okay, somehow they wiped our memories . . . not just our childhood, but all the stuff leading up to entering the Maze. They put us in the Box and sent us up here . . . a big group to start and then one a month over the last two years."

"But why?" Newt asked. "What's the bloody point?"

Thomas held up a hand for silence. "I'm getting there. Like I said, they wanted to test us, see how we'd react to what they call the Variables, and to a problem that has no solution. See if we could work together. build a community, even. Everything was provided for us, and the problem was . . . a door as one of the most common puzzles known to civilization . . . a maze. All this added up to making us think there *had* to be a solution, just encouraging us to work all the harder while at the same time making us feel discouraged when we found none. He paused to look around, making sure they were all listening. "What I'm saying is, there *is* no solution."

Chatter broke out, questions overlapping each other.

Thomas held his hands up again, wishing he could just zap his thoughts into everyone else's brains. "See? Your reaction proves my point. Most people would've given up by now. But I think we're different. We couldn't accept that a problem *can't* be solved—especially when it's something as simple as a maze. And we've kept fighting no matter how hopeless it's got."

Thomas realised his voice had steadily risen as he spoke, and he felt heat in his face. "Whatever the reason, it makes me sick! All of this—the Grievors, the walls moving, the Clift—they're just elements of a stupid test. We're being used and manipulated. The Creators wanted to keep our minds working towards a solution that was never there. Same thing goes for Teresa being sent here, her being used to trigger the Flooding—whatever *that* means—the place being shut down, grey skies, on and on and on. They're throwing crazy things at us to see our responses, test our will. See if we'll turn on each other. In the end, they want the survivors for something important."

Frypan stood up. "And killing people? That's a nice little part of their plan?"

Thomas felt a moment of fear, worried that the keepers might take out their anger on him for knowing so much. And it was only about to get worse. "Yes, Frypan, killing people. The only reason the Creators are doing it one by one is so we don't all die before it ends the way it's supposed to. Survival of the fittest. Only the best of us will escape."

Frypan kicked his chair. "We'd *you'd* better start talking about this magical escape, then."

"He will." Newt said quietly. "Shut up and listen."

Minho, who'd been mostly silent the whole time, cleared his throat. "Something else me, I'm not gonna do what I'm about to hear."

"Probably not," Thomas said. He closed his eyes for a second and folded his arms. The next few minutes were going to be crucial. "The Creators want the best of us for whatever it is they have planned. But we have to earn it." The room fell

completely silent, every eye on him. "The code."

"The code?" Frypan repeated, his voice lighting up with a trace of hope. "What about it?"

Thomas looked at him, paused for effect. "It was hidden in the wall movements of the Maze for a reason. I should know. I was there when the Creators did it.

CHAPTER 50

For a long moment, no one said anything, and all Thomas saw were blank faces. He felt the sweat beading on his forehead, sucking his hands; he was terrified to keep going.

Newt looked completely baffled and finally broke the silence. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, first there's something I have to share. About me and Teresa. There's a reason Gally accused me of so much stuff, and why everyone who's gone through the Changing recognises me."

He expected questions—an eruption of voices—but the room was dead silent.

"Teresa and I are...different," he continued. "We were part of the Maze trials from the very beginning—but against our will, I swear it."

Minho was the one to speak up now. "Thomas, what're you talking about?"

"Teresa and I were used by the Creators. If you had your full

memories back, you'd probably want to kill us. But I had to tell you this myself to show you we can be trusted now. So you'll believe me when I tell you the only way we can get out of here."

Thomas quickly scanned the faces of the Keepers, wondering for the last time if he should say it if they would understand. But he knew he had to. He *had* to.

Thomas took a deep breath then said it. "Teresa and I helped design the Maze. We helped create the whole thing."

Everyone seemed too stunned to respond. Blank faces stared back at him once again. Thomas figured they either didn't understand or didn't believe him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Newt finally asked. "You're a bloody sixteen-year-old. How could you have created the Maze?"

Thomas couldn't help doubting it a little himself, but he knew what he'd remembered. As crazy as it was, he knew it for the truth. "We were . . . smart. And I think it might be part of the Variables. But most importantly, Teresa and I have a gift that made us very valuable as they designed and built this place." He stopped, knowing it must all sound absurd.

"Speak!" Newt yelled. "Spit it out!"

"We're telepathic. We can talk to each other in our freaking heads." Saying it out loud almost made him feel ashamed, as if he'd just admitted he was a thief.

Newt blinked in surprise, so someone laughed.

"But listen to me." Thomas continued in a hurry to defend himself. "They *forced* us to help. I don't know how or why, but they did." He paused. "Maybe it was to see if we could gain your trust despite having been a part of them. Maybe we were meant all along to be the ones to reveal how to escape. Whatever the reason, with your Maps we figured out the code and we need to use it now."

Thomas looked around, and surprisingly, astonishingly, no one seemed angry. Most of the Keepers continued to stare blankly at him, or shook their heads in wonder or disbelief.

And for some odd reason, Minho was smiling.

"It's true, and I'm sorry," Thomas continued. "But I can tell you this—I'm in the same boat as you now. Teresa and I were sent here just like anyone else, and we can die just as easily. But the Creators have seen enough—it's time for the final test. I guess I needed the Changing to add the final pieces of the puzzle. Anyway, I wanted you to know the truth, to know there's a chance we can do this."

Newt shook his head back and forth, staring at the ground. Then he looked up, took in the other Keepers. "The Creators chose shanks did this to us, not Tommy and Teresa. The Creators. And they're sorry."

"Whatever," Minho said, "who gives a hunk about all that—just get on with the escape."

A lump formed in Thomas's throat. He was so relieved he almost couldn't speak. He'd been sure they'd put him under major heat for his confession, if not throw him off the Cliff. The rest of what he had to say almost seemed easy now. "There's a computer station in a place we've never looked before. The code will open a door for us to get out of the Maze. It also shuts down the Grievers so they can't follow us—if we can just survive long enough to get to that point."

"A place we've never *looked* before?" Aby asked. "What do you think we've been doing for two years?"

"Trust me, you've never been to this spot."

Minho stood up. "Well, where is it?"

"It's a no-hesitate suicide," Thomas said, knowing he was putting off the answer. "The Creators will come after us whenever we try to do it. All of them. The final test." He wanted to make sure they understood the stakes. The odds of everyone surviving were slim.

"So where is it?" Newt asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"Over the Cliff," Thomas answered. "We have to go through the Griever Hole."

CHAPTER 51

Alby stood up so quickly his chair fell over backwards. His bloodshot eyes stared out against the white bandage on his forehead. He took two steps forward before stopping, as if he'd been about to charge and attack Thomas.

"Now you're being a stuck idiot," he said, glaring at Thomas. "Or a traitor. How can we trust a word you say if you helped design this place put us here? We can handle one Griever on our own ground, much less fight a whole horde of them in their little hole. What are you really up to?"

Thomas was furious. "What am I up to? Nothing! Why would I make all this up?"

Alby's arms stiffened, fists clenched. "For all we know you were sent here to get us all killed. Why should we trust you?"

Thomas stared incredulous. "Aww, do you have a short-term memory problem? I asked my life to save you out in the Maze — you'd be dead if it wasn't for me."

"Maybe that was a trick to gain our trust. If you're in league with the shucks who sent us here, you wouldn't have had to

worry about the Grievors hurting you – maybe it was all an act.”

Thomas's anger lessened slightly at that, turned into pity. Something was odd here – suspicious.

“Alby,” Minho finally interjected, relieving Thomas. “That’s about the dumbest theory I’ve ever heard. He just about got freaking torn apart three nights ago. You think that’s part of the act?”

Alby nodded once, curtly. “Maybe.”

“I *did* it,” Thomas said, throwing all the annoyance he could into his voice. “on the chance that I could get my memories back, help all of us get out of here. Do I need to show you the cuts and bruises all over my body?”

Alby said nothing, his face still quivering with rage. His eyes watered and veins popped out on his neck. “We can’t go back.” He finally yelled, turning to look at everyone in the room. “I’ve seen what our lives were like – we can’t go back.”

“Is *that* what this is about?” Newt asked. “Are you kidding?”

Alby turned on him, fiercely, even held up a clenched fist. But he stopped, lowered his arm, then went over and sank into his chair, put his face in his hands, and broke down. Thomas couldn’t have been more surprised. The fearless leader of the Gladers was crying.

“Alby talk to us,” Newt pressed, not waiting for a reply. “What’s going on?”

“I did it,” Alby said through a racking sob. “I did it.”

“Did what?” Newt asked. He looked as confused as Thomas felt.

Alby looked up, his eyes wet with tears. “I burned the Maps. I did it. I slammed my head on the table so you’d think it was someone else. I lied, I burned it all. I did it.”

The Keepers exchanged looks, shock clear in their wide eyes and raised eyebrows. For Thomas, though, it all made sense now. Alby remembered how awful his life was before he came here – and he didn’t want to go back.

"Well, it's a good thing we saved those Maps." Minho said, completely straight-faced almost mocking. "Thanks for the tip you gave us after the Changing to protect them."

Thomas looked to see how Abby would respond to Minho's sarcastic, almost cruel, remark, but he acted as if he had it even heard.

Now, instead of showing anger, asked Abby to explain. Thomas knew why Newt wasn't angry—the Maps were safe, the code figured out. It didn't matter.

"I'm teasing you," Abby sounded like he was regging—near hysterical. "We can't go back to where we came from. I've seen it, remembered awful awful things. Burned land, a disease something called the Flare. It was horrible—way worse than we have it here."

"If we stay *here*, we'll all die!" Minho yelled. "It's worse than that!"

Abby stared at Minho a long time before answering. Thomas could only think of the words he'd just said: *The Flare*. Something about it was familiar, right on the edge of his mind. But he was certain he hadn't remembered anything about that when he'd gone through the Changing.

"Yes," Abby finally said. "It's worse. Better to die than go home."

Minho sniggered and leaned back in his chair. "Man, you are one bright ball of sunshine. Let me tell you, I'm with Thomas—and with Thomas, one hundred percent. If we're gonna die, let's freakin' do it, fightin'."

"Inside the Maze or out of it," Thomas added, relieved that Minho was firm on his side. He turned to Abby then, and looked at him gravely. "We still live inside the world you remembered."

Abby stood again, his face showing his defeat. "Do what you want." He sighed. "Doesn't matter. We'll die no matter what." And with that, he walked to the door and left the room.

Newt let out a deep breath and shook his head. "He's never

been the same since being stung – must've been one bugged of a memory. What in the world is the Fare?"

"I don't care," Minho said. "Anything's better than dying here. We can deal with the Creators once we're out. But for now we've gotta do what they planned. Go through the Griever Hole and escape. If some of us die, so be it."

Frypan snorted. "You sharks are driving me nuts. Can't get out of the Maze and his idea of hanging with the Grievers at their bachelor pad sounds as stupid as anything I've ever heard in my life. Might as well cut our wrists."

The other Keepers burst out in argument, everyone talking over everyone else. Newt finally screamed for them to shut up.

Thomas spoke again once things settled. "I'm going through the Hole or I'll die trying to get there. Looks like Minho will, too. And I'm sure Teresas is. If we can fight off the Grievers long enough for someone to punch in the code and shut them down, then we can go through the door *they* come through. We'll have passed the tests. Then we can face the Creators themselves."

Newt's grin had no humour in it. "And you think we can fight off Grievers? Even if we don't die, we'll probably all get stung. Every last one of them might be waiting for us when we get to the Cliff – the beetle blades are out there constantly. The Creators'll know when we make our run for it."

He'd been dreading it, but Thomas knew it was time to tell them the last part of his plan. "I don't think they're listening – the Changing was a Variable meant for us while we lived here. But that part will be over. Plus, we might have one thing going for us."

"Yeah?" Newt asked, rolling his eyes. "Can't wait to hear it."

"It doesn't do the Creators any good if we all die. This thing is meant to be hard, not impossible. I think we finally know for sure that the Grievers are programmed to only kill one of us each day. So somebody can sacrifice himself to save the others."

while we run to the House. I think this might be how it's supposed to happen."

The room went silent until the Blood House Keeper barked a loud laugh. "Excuse me?" Winston asked. "Is your suggestion is that we throw some poor kid to the wolves so the rest of us can escape? *This* is your *brilliant* suggestion?"

Thomas refused to admit how bad that sounded, but an idea hit him. "Yes, Winston. I'm glad you're so good at paying attention on." He ignored the glare that got him. "And it seems obvious who the poor kid should be."

"Oh, yeah?" Winston asked. "Who?"

Thomas folded his arms. "Me."

CHAPTER 52

The meeting erupted into a chorus of arguments. Newt very calmly stood up, walked over to Thomas and grabbed him by the arm. He pulled him towards the door. "You're leaving. Now."

Thomas was stunned. "Leaving? Why?"

"Think you've said enough for one meeting. We need to talk and decide what to do *without* you here." They had reached the door and Newt gave him a gentle push outside. "Wait for me by the Box. When we're done, you and I talk."

He started to turn around, but Thomas reached out and grabbed him. "You've gotta believe me. Newt, it's the only way out of here. We can do it. I swear. We're *meant* to."

Newt got it his face and spoke in an angry rasp of a whisper. "Yeah... especially loved the bit where you volunteered to get yourself killed."

"I'm perfectly willing to do it." Thomas meant it, but only because of the guilt that racked him. Guilt that he'd somehow helped design the Maze. But deep down, he held on to the

hope + at I could fight strong enough for someone to punch in the code and shut down the Grievors before they killed him. Open the door.

"Oh, really?" Newt asked, seeming irritated. "Mr Noble himself, aren't ya?"

"I have plenty of my own reasons, in some ways it's my fault we're here in the first place." He stopped, took a breath + composed himself. "Anyway, I'm going no matter what so I'd better not waste it."

Newt frowned, his eyes suddenly filled with compassion. "If you really did help design the Maze, Tommy, it's not your fault. You're a *kid* - you can't help what they forced you to do."

But it didn't matter what Newt said. What anyone said. Thomas bore the responsibility anyway - and it was growing heavier the more he thought about it. "I just... feel like I need to save everyone. To redeem myself."

Newt stepped back, slowly shaking his head. "You know what's funny, Tommy?"

"What?" Thomas replied, wary.

"I actually believe you. You just don't have an ounce of lying in those eyes of yours. And I can't bloody believe I'm about to say this." He paused. "But coming back in there to convince those shanks we should go through the Griever hove, just like you said. Might as well fight the Grievors rather than sit around letting them pick us off one by one." He held up a finger. "But listen to me - I don't want another buggin' word about you dying and all that heroic work. If we're gonna do this, we'll take our chances - and let us. You hear me?"

Thomas held his hands up, overwhelmed with relief. "I could swear I was just trying to make the point that it's worth the risk. If someone's going to die every night anyway, we might as well use it to our advantage."

Newt frowned. "Well, aren't that just cheery?"

Thomas turned to walk away, but Newt called out to him. "Tommy?"

Yeah?" He stopped but didn't look back.

"If I can convince those shanks – and that's a big *if* – the best time to go would be at night. We can hope that a lot of the Grievors might be out and about in the Maze – not in that Hole of theirs."

"Good that." Thomas agreed with him – he just hoped Newt could convince the keepers. He turned to look at Newt and nodded.

Newt smiled a barely there crack in his worried grimace. "We should do it tonight, before anyone else is killed." And before Thomas could say anything, Newt disappeared back into the Gathering.

Thomas, a little shocked at the last statement, left the Homestead and walked to an old bench near the Box and took a seat, his mind a whirlwind. He kept thinking of what Abby had said about the Flare, and what a coup it meant. The older boy had also mentioned burned earth and a disease. Thomas didn't remember anything like that, but if it was all true, the world they were trying to get back to didn't sound so good. Still,

what other choice did they have? Besides the fact that the Grievors were attacking every night, the Glade had basically shut down.

Frustrated, worried, tired of his thoughts, he called out to Teresa. *Can you hear me?*

Yeah, she replied. Where are you?

By the Box.

I'll come in a minute.

Thomas realised how badly he needed her company. *Good. I'll tell you the plan, I think it's on.*

What is it?

Thomas leaned back on the bench and put his right foot up on his knee, wondering how Teresa would react to what he was going to say. *We've gotta go through the Griever Hole. Use that code to shut the Grievors down and open a door out of here.*

A pause. *I figured it was something like that.*

Thomas thought for a second then added *Unless you've got any better ideas?*

No. It's gonna be awful.

He punched his right fist against his other hand, even though he knew she couldn't see him. *We can do this.*

Doubtful.

Well, we have to try.

Another pause, this one longer. He could feel her resolve. *You're right.*

I think we're leaving tonight. Just come out here and we can talk more about it.

I'll be there in a few minutes.

Thomas's stomach tightened into a knot. The reality of what he had suggested—the plan Newt was trying to convince the Keepers to accept—was starting to hit him. He knew it was dangerous, but the idea of actually fighting the Grievors—not just running from them—was terrifying. The absolute best-case scenario was that only one of them would die, but even that couldn't be trusted. Maybe the Creators would just reprogram the creatures. And then all bets were off.

He tried not to think about it.

Sooner than Thomas expected, Teresa had found him and was sitting next to him, her body pressed against his even though there was plenty of room on the bench. She reached out and took his hand. He squeezed back, so hard he knew it must've hurt.

"Tell me," she said.

Thomas did, reciting every word he'd told the Keepers, hating how Teresa's eyes flared with worry—and terror. "The plan was easy to talk about," he said after he'd told her everything. "But Newt thinks we should go *tonight*. It doesn't sound so good now." Especially terrified him to think about Chuck and Teresa out there—he'd faced the Grievors down already and knew all too well what it was like. He wanted to be able to

protect his friends from the horrible experience but he knew he couldn't.

"We can do it," she said in a quiet voice.

Hearing her say that only made him worry more. "Holy crap, I'm scared."

"Holy crap, you're human. You *should* be scared."

Thomas didn't respond, and for a long time they just sat there, holding hands, no words spoken, in their minds or aloud. He felt the slightest hint of peace as fleeting as it was, and tried to enjoy it for however long it might last.

CHAPTER 53

Thomas was almost sad when the Gathering finally ended. When Newt came out of the Homestead he knew that the time for rest was over.

The Keeper spotted them and approached at a loping run. Thomas reached out to grasp heres hand without thinking about it. Newt finally came to a halt and crossed his arms over his chest as he looked down at them sitting on the bench. "This is bloody nice, you know that, right?" His face was impossible to read, but there seemed to be a hint of victory in his eyes.

Thomas stood up, feeling a rush of excitement flooding his body. "So they agreed to go?"

Newt nodded. "All of them. Was it as hard as I thought it'd be. Those shanks've seen what happens at night with those bloody doors open. We can get out of the stupid Maze. Gotta try *something*." He turned and looked at the keepers, who started to gather their respective work groups. "Now we just have to convince the Gladers."

Thomas knew that would be even more difficult than persuading the Keepers had been.

"You think they'll go for it?" Teresa asked, finally standing to join them.

"Not all of them," Newt said, and Thomas could see the frustration in his eyes. "Some I stay and take their chances guarantee it."

Thomas didn't doubt people would blanch at the thought of making a run for it. Asking them to fight the Grievors was asking a lot. "What about Abby?"

"Who knows?" Newt responded, looking around the Glade, observing the Keepers and their groups. "I'm convinced that bugger really *is* more scared to go back home than he is of the Grievors. But if I get him to go with us, don't worry."

Thomas wished he could bring back memories of those nights that were tormenting Abby, but there was nothing. "How are you going to convince him?"

Newt laughed. "I'll make up some kunk. Tell him we'll all find a new life in another part of the world. I've happily ever after."

Thomas shrugged. "Well, maybe we can. I promised Chuck I'd get him home, you know. Or at least find him a home."

"Yeah, well," Teresa murmured. "Anything's better than this place."

Thomas looked around at the arguments breaking out across the Glade. Keepers doing their best to convince people they should take a chance and battle their way through the Griever Haze. Some followers stomped away but most seemed to listen and at least consider.

"So what's next?" Teresa asked.

Newt took a deep breath. "Figure out what's going, who's staying. Get ready. Food, weapons, all that. Then we go. Thomas, I put you in charge since it was your idea, but it's going to be hard enough to get people on our side without making the Greenie our leader. No offence. So just lay low."

okay? We'll leave the code business to you, and Teresa - you can hand a hat from the backgrind."

Thomas was more than fine with going low - finding that computer station and punching in the code was more than enough responsibility for him. Even with that much on his shoulders he had to fight the rising tide of panic he felt. "You make it so god easy," he finally said, trying his best to lighten up the situation. Or at least *sound* like he was.

Newt folded his arms again, looked at him closely. "Like you said, stay here, one shark bite for eight cuts, one shark I die. What's the difference?" He peered at Thomas. "You're right."

That's what Thomas knew he was right about the time he crade the door, he need to fight. But whether one person or many would die, he had no clue. However, if there was one thing his gut told him, it was not to admit to any doubt.

Newt clapped him on the back. "Good that. Lets get to work."

The next few hours were frantic.

Most of the traders ended up agreeing to go - even more than Thomas would've guessed. Even Alby decided to make the run, though no one admitted it. Thomas bet most of them were hanging on to the theory that no one person would be killed by the Grievors, and they figured their chances of not being the unlucky sap were decent. Those who decided to stay home & hide were few but adamant and loud. They mainly walked around sulking, trying to tell others how stupid they were. Eventually, they gave up and kept their distance.

For Thomas and the rest of those committed to the escape, there was a ton of work to be done.

Rucksacks were made up and stuffed full of supplies. Frypan - Newt told Thomas that the Cook had been one of the last keepers to agree to go - was in charge of gathering all the food and figuring out a way to distribute it evenly among the packs. Springs of Grief Set in were included even though

Thomas didn't think the Greivers would sting them. Chuck was in charge of fixing water borders and getting them out to everyone. Teresa helped him, and Thomas asked her to sugar-coat the trip as much as she could, even if she had to flat-out lie, which was mostly the case. Chuck had tried to act brave from the time he first found out they were going for it, but his sweaty skin and dazed eyes revealed the truth.

Minho went to the Cliff with a group of Runners, taking vines, ropes and rocks to test the invisible Greiver Hole one last time. They had to hope the creatures would keep to their normal schedule and not come out during daytime hours. Thomas had contemplated just jumping into the Hole right away and trying to punch in the code quickly, but he had no idea what to expect or what might be waiting for him. Newt was right – they'd better wait until night and hope that most of the Greivers were in the Maze, not inside their Hole.

When Minho returned safe and sound, Thomas thought he seemed very optimistic that it really was an exit. Or entrance. Depending on how you looked at it.

Thomas helped Newt distribute the weapons, and even more innovative ones were created in their desperation to be prepared for the Greivers. Wooden poles were carved into spears or whippers in barbed wire. The knives were sharpened and fastened with twine to the ends of sturdy branches hacked from trees in the woods. Chunks of broken glass were duct-taped to shovels. By the end of the day, the Greaders had turned into a small army. A very pathetic, ill-prepared army, Thomas thought, but an army all the same.

Once he and Teresa were done helping, they went to the secret spot in the Deadheads to strategize about the plan on inside the Greiver Hole and how they planned to punch in the code.

"We have to be the ones to do it," Thomas said as they leaned their backs against craggy trees the once-green caves already starting to turn grey from the lack of artificial sunlight.

"That way if we get separated, we can be in contact and still help each other."

Teresa had grabbed a stick and was peering off the back. "But we need backup in case something happens to us."

Definitely Mingo and Newt know the code words—we'll tell them they have to get them punched into the computer; we—well, you know. Thomas didn't want to think about all the bad things that might happen.

"Not much to the plan, then," Teresa yawned, as if it were completely normal.

"Not much at all. Fight the Grievors, punch in the code, escape through the door. Then we deal with the Creators whatever it takes."

"Six code words, who knows how many Grievors." Teresa broke the stick in half. "What do you think *WICKED* stands for, anyway?"

Thomas felt like he'd been hit in the stomach. For some reason, hearing the word at that moment, from someone else, knocked something loose in his mind, and it clicked. He was stunned he hadn't made the connection sooner. "That sign I saw out in the Maze—remember? The meta-line with words stamped on it?" Thomas's heart had started to race with excitement.

Teresa crinkled her forehead in confusion for a second, but then a light seemed to blink to life and her eyes. "Whoa. World in Catastrophe: Hazardous Experiment Department. *WICKED*. *WICKED is good*—what I wrote on my arm. What does that even mean?"

"No idea. Which is why I'm scared to death that what we're about to do is really stupid. Could be a bloodbath."

"Everyone knows what they're getting into." Teresa reached out and took his hand. "Nothing to lose, remember?"

Thomas remembered, but for some reason Teresa's words felt flat—they didn't have much hope in them. "Nothing to lose," he repeated.

CHAPTER 54

Just before the normal Door-closing time, Frypan prepared one last meal to carry them through the night. The mood hanging over the Gladers as they ate couldn't have been more sombre or sodden with fear. Thomas found himself sitting next to Chuck, absently picking at his food.

"So... Thomas," the boy said through a huge bite of mashed potatoes. "Who are you named after?"

Thomas couldn't help shaking his head. Here they were about to embark on probably the most dangerous task of their lives, and Chuck was curious where he'd got his nickname. "I don't know. Darwin, maybe. The dude who figured out evolution."

"I bet no one's ever called him a dude before." Chuck took another big bite, and seemed a little calmer. "He's the best time to talk, full mouth and all. You know, I'm really not all that scared. I mean, last few nights, sitting in the Pit instead, just waiting for a Griever to come in and steal one of us, was the worst thing I've ever done. At least now we're taking it to them,

ing something. And at least . . ."

"At least what?" Thomas asked. He did not believe for a second that Chuck wasn't scared. It almost hurt to see him acting brave.

"Well, everyone's speculating they can only kill one of us. Maybe a sound like a shock, but it gives me some hope. At least most of us will make it through. Just leaves one poor sucker to die. Better than all of us."

It made Thomas sick to think people were hanging on to that hope of just one person dying, the more he thought about it, the less he believed it was true. The Creators knew the plan they might reprogram the Crevers. But even false hope was better than nothing. Maybe we can all make it. As long as everyone fights."

Chuck stopped waiting a second for a second and looked at Thomas carefully. "You really think that or are you trying to cheer me up?"

"We can do it." Thomas already had to take a big drink of water. He'd never felt like such a fat nervous cat. People were going to die. But he was going to do everything possible to make sure Chuck wasn't one of them. And Teresa. "Don't forget my promise. You can still plan on it."

Chuck frowned. "Big deal. I keep hearing the world is in shanky shape."

"Hey, maybe so, but we'll find the people who care about us you'll see."

Chuck stood up. "Well, I don't wanna talk about it," he announced. "Just get me out of the Maze and I'll be one happy dude."

"Good tant," Thomas agreed.

A commotion from the other tables caught his attention. Newt and Abby were gathering the children, telling everyone it was time to go. Abby seemed most at himself, but Thomas was still worried about the guys' mental state. In Thomas's mind, Newt was in charge, but he could also be a loose cannon sometimes.

The icy fear and panic Thomas had experienced so often in the last few days swept over him once again in full force. This was it. They were going. Trying not to think about it, to just act, he grabbed his rucksack. Chuck did the same, and they headed for the West Door, the one leading to the Cliff.

Thomas found Minho and Teresa talking to each other near the left side of the Door, going over the hastily-made plans to enter the escape code once they got into the Hole.

"You shanks ready?" Minho asked when they came up.
"Thomas, this was all your idea, so it better work. If not, I'll kill ya before the Greysers can."

"Thanks," Thomas said. But he couldn't shake the twisting feeling in his gut. What if somehow he *was* wrong? What if the memories he'd had were false ones? *Fliken* somehow? The thought terrified him, and he pushed it aside. There was no going back.

He looked at Teresa, who shifted from foot to foot, wringing her hands. "You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she answered with a small smile, clearly not fine at all. "Just anxious to get it over with."

"Amen, sister," Minho said. He looked the calmest to Thomas, the most confident, the least scared. Thomas envied him.

When Newt finally had everyone gathered, he called for quiet, and Thomas turned to hear what he had to say. "There are forty-one of us." He pulled the rucksack he was hanging onto his shoulders, and hoisted a thick wooden pole with barbed wire wrapped around its tip. The thing looked deadly. "Make sure you've got your weapons. Other than that, there's not a whole lot to buggin' say. You've all been told the plan. We're gonna fight our way through to the Greyser Hole, and Tommy here's gonna punch in his little magic code and then we're gonna get payback on the Creators. Simple as that."

Thomas barely heard Newt, having seen Abby sulking over to the side, away from the main group of the Gladders, alone.

Alby picked a double string of his bow while he stared at the ground. A quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder. Thomas felt a rising tide of worry that somehow Alby was unstable, that somehow he'd screw everything up. He decided to watch him carefully if he could.

"Shouldn't someone give a pep talk or something?" Minho asked, pulling Thomas's attention away from Alby.

"Go ahead," Newt replied.

Minho nodded and faced the crowd. "Be careful," he said dryly. "Don't die."

Thomas would have laughed if he could, but he was too scared for it to come out.

"Great. We're all bloody inspired," Newt answered, then pointed over his shoulder towards the Maze. "You all know the plan. After two years of being treated like mice, tonight we're making a stand. Tonight we're taking the fight back to the Creators, no matter what we have to go through to get there. Tonight the Greasers better be scared."

Someone cheered, and then someone else. Soon shouts and battle calls broke out, rising in volume, filling the air like thunder. Thomas felt a trickle of courage inside him—he grasped it and clung to it, urged it to grow. Newt was right. Tonight, they'd fight. Tonight, they'd make their stand, once and for all.

Thomas was ready. He moved with the other Gladders. He knew they should probably be quiet, not bring any more attention to themselves, but he didn't care. The game was on.

Newt thrust his weapon into the air and yelled, "Hear that, Creators? We're coming!"

And with that, he turned and ran into the Maze, his leap only noticeable into the grey air that seemed darker than the Gladders' world of shadows and darkness. The Gladders around Thomas all cheered, picked up their weapons and ran after him, even Alby. Thomas followed, taking note of one between Teresa and a boy, holding a big wooden spear with a knife tied

at its tip. The sudden feeling of responsibility for his friends almost overwhelmed him—made it hard to run. But he kept going, determined to win.

You can do this, he thought. Just make it to that Hole.

CHAPTER 55

Thomas kept a steady pace as he ran with the other Clackers along the stone pathways towards the cliff. His grown-up use of running the Maze, but this was completely different. The sounds of shuffling feet echoed up the walls and the red lights of the beetle blades flashed more menacingly in the ivy. The Creators were certainly watching, listening. One way or another there was going to be a fight.

Scared? Teresa asked Thomas hesitantly.

No. I am being made out of bamboo and steel. Can't wait to see them bleed, pain, or humour and wondered if there'd ever be a time again when we were

So funny, she responded.

She was right next to him, so his eyes stayed glued up ahead. When he turned just away from the door of the Maze.

Am my Knight not a gentleman? What you don't think I can fend for myself?

Act as if he thought quite the opposite. Teresa seemed as tough as anybody there. No, I'm just trying to be nice.

The group was spread out across the full width of the corridor running at a steady but quick pace. Thomas wondered how long the non-Runners would hold up. As a response to the thought Newt fell back, finally tapping Minho on the shoulder. "You lead the way now," Thomas heard him say.

Minho nodded and ran to the front, guiding the others through all the turns necessary. Every step was agonizing for Thomas. What courage he'd gathered had turned to dread, and he wondered when the Griever would finally give chase. Wondered when the fight would begin.

And so it went for him as they kept moving, those Gaders not used to running such distances gasping in huge gulps of air. But no one quit. On and on they ran, with no signs of Greivers. And as the time passed, Thomas let the slightest trickle of hope enter his system—maybe they'd make it before getting attacked. Maybe.

Finally, after the longest hour of Thomass life, they reached the long alley that led to the last turn before the Cliff—a short corridor to the right that branched off the stem of the letter *T*.

Thomas, his heart thumping, sweat soaking his skin, had moved up right behind Minho. Teresa at his side. Minho slowed at the corner, then stopped, holding up a hand to tell Thomas and the others to do the same. Then he turned, a look of horror on his face.

"Do you hear that?" he whispered.

Thomas shook his head, trying to squash the terror Minhos expression had given him.

Minho crept ahead and peeked around the sharp edge of stone, looking towards the Cliff. Thomas had seen him do that before—when they'd followed a Greiver to this very spot. Just like that time, Minho jerked back and turned to face him.

"Oh, no," the Keeper said through a moan. "Oh, no."

Then Thomas heard the Greiver sound. It was as if they'd been hiding, waiting, and now were coming off. He didn't

ever have to look – he knew what Minho was going to say before he said it.

"There's at least a dozen of them. Maybe fifteen." He reached up and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "They're just waiting for us!"

The icy chill of fear bit Thomas harder than ever before. He looked over at Teresa, about to say something, but stopped when he saw the expression on her pale face – he'd never seen terror present itself so starkly.

Newt and Abby had moved up the line of waiting Gladders to join Thomas and the others. Apparently Minho's pronouncement had already been whispered through the ranks – because the first thing Newt said was, "Well, we knew we'd have to fight." But the tremor in his voice gave him away – he was just trying to say the right thing.

Thomas felt it himself. It had been easy to talk about – the nothing-to-lose fight, the hope that at least one of them would be taken, the chance to finally escape. But now it was here, literally around the corner. Doubts that he could go through with it seeped into his mind and heart. He wondered why the Grievors were just waiting – the beetle blades had obviously let them know the Gladders were coming. Were the Grievors *enjoying* this?

He had an idea. "Maybe they've already taken a kid back at the Glade. Maybe we can get past them – why else would they just be sitting?"

A loud noise ran back through him off – he spun to see where Grievors moving down the corridor towards them, spikes flaring, metal arms gapping, coming from the direction of the Glade. Thomas was just about to say something when he heard sounds from the other end of the long alley – he looked to see yet more Grievors.

The enemy was on all sides, backing them off completely.

The Gladders surged towards Thomas, forming a tight group, forcing him to move out into the open intersection

where the Cliff Corridor met the long alley. He saw the pack of Grievors between them and the Cliff spiders extended their moist skin pulsing in and out. Waiting, watching. The other two groups of Grievors had closed in and stopped past tens of metres from the Gladers, also waiting, watching.

Thomas slowly turned in a circle, fought the fear as he took it all in. They were surrounded. They had no choice now there was nowhere to go. A sharp pulsing pain throbbed behind his eyes.

The Gladers compressed into a tighter group around him, everyone facing outwards, huddled together in the centre of the T intersection. Thomas was pressed between Newt and Teresa - he could feel Newt trembling. No one said a word. The only sounds were the eerie moans and whirs of machinery coming from the Grievors, sitting there as if enjoying the Lute trap they'd set for the humans. Their disgusting bodies heaved in and out with mechanical wheezes of breath.

What are they doing? Thomas called out to Teresa. *What are they waiting for?*

She didn't answer, which warned him. He reached out and squeezed her hand. The Gladers around him stood silent, clutching their meagre weapons.

Thomas looked over at Newt. "Got any ideas?"

"No," he replied, his voice just the faintest bit shaky. "I don't understand what they're bloody waiting for."

"We should've come," Abby said. He'd been so quiet, his voice sounded odd, especially with the now-echoing *Maze* walls created.

Thomas was in no mood for whining - they had to *do* something. "Well, we'd be no better off than the Homes can. Hate to say it, but if one of us dies, that's better than all of us." He really hoped the one-person-a-night thing was true now. Seeing all these Grievors close up his home with an expression of reality - could they really fight them all?

A long moment passed before Abby replied. "Maybe I

sh and " He traded off and started walking forward in the direction of the Cliff slowly as if in a trance Thomas watched in detached awe he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Alby!" Newt said "Get back here!"

Instead of responding, Alby took off running he headed straight for the pack of Grievors between him and the Cliff.

"Alby!" Newt screamed.

Thomas started to say something himself, but Alby had already traded off to the monsters and jumped on top of one. Newt moved away from Thomas's side and towards Alby but five or six Grievors had already burst to life and attacked the boy in a blur of metal and skin. Thomas reached out and grabbed Newt by the arms before he could go any farther then pulled him backwards.

"Let go!" Newt yelled, struggling to break loose.

"Are you nuts?" Thomas shouted "There's nothing you can do!"

Two more Grievors broke from the pack and swarmed over Alby piling on top of each other snapping and cutting at the boy as if they wanted to rub it in, show their vicious cruelty. Somehow, impossibly Alby didn't scream. Thomas lost sight of the boy as he struggled with Newt, thankful for the distraction. Newt finally gave up, collapsing backwards in defeat.

Alby had fought once and for all. Thomas thought, fighting the urge to rid his stomach of its contents. The leader had been so scared to go back to whatever he'd seen, he'd chosen to sacrifice himself instead. He was gone. Totally gone.

Thomas helped steady Newt on his feet, the leader couldn't stop staring at the spot where his friend had disappeared.

"I can't believe it," Newt whispered "I can't believe he just did that."

Thomas shook his head, unable to stop seeing Alby go down, the fact that a new kind of pain had never felt before filled his chest. A disturbed pain, even worse than he

physical kind. And he didn't even know if it had anything to do with Abby. He'd never much liked the guy. But the thought that what he'd just seen might happen to Chuck or Teresa...

Minho moved closer to Thomas and Newt squeezed Newt's shoulder. "We can't waste what he did." He turned towards Thomas. "We'll fight 'em if we have to. make a path to the Cliff for you and Teresa. Get in the Hole and do your thing. we'll keep them off until you scream for us to follow."

Thomas looked at each of the three sets of Grievors - not one had yet made a move towards the Leaders - and nodded. "Hopefully they'll go dormant for a while. We should only need a minute or so to punch in the code."

"How can you guys be so heartless?" Newt murmured, the disgust in his voice surprising Thomas.

"What do you want, Newt?" Minho said. "Should we all dress up and have a funeral?"

Newt didn't respond, still staring at the spot where the Grievors seemed to be feeding on Abby beneath them. Thomas couldn't help taking a peek - he saw a smear of bright red on one of the creatures' bodies. His stomach turned and he quickly looked away.

Minho continued. "Abby didn't wanna go back to his old life. He freaking *sacrificed* himself for us - and they aren't attacking us, so maybe it worked. We'd be heartless if we wasted it."

Newt only shrugged, closed his eyes.

Minho turned and faced the maddled group of Leaders. "Listen up. Number one priority is to protect Thomas and Teresa. Get them to the Cliff and the Hole, so."

The sounds of the Grievors revving rang in the air. Thomas looked up in horror. The creatures on both sides of their group seemed to have noticed them again. Spines were popping in and out of a leathery skin, their heads shuddered and pulsed. Then, in unison, the monsters moved forward.

slowly, instrument-tipped appendages unfolding, pointed at Thomas and the Gaders, ready to kill. Tightening their trap formation like a noose, the Grievors steadily charged towards them.

Aby's sacrifice had failed miserably.

CHAPTER 56

Thomas grabbed Minho by the arm. "Somehow I have to get through that!" He nodded towards the railing pack of Grievors between them and the Cliff—they looked like one big mass of rumbling, spiked bubbles glistening with flashes of lights off steel. They were even more menacing in the faded grey light.

Thomas waited for an answer as Minho and Newt exchanged a long glance. The anticipation of fighting was almost worse than the fear of it.

"They're *coming*," Teresa yelled. "We have to do something."

"You lead," Newt finally said to Minho, his voice barely more than a whisper. "Make a bloody path for Tommy and the girl. Do it."

Minho nodded once, a steel look of resolve hardening his features. Then he turned towards the Gladders. "We head straight for the C.P. right through the middle, push the shuckin' things towards the walls. What matters most is getting Thomas and Teresa to the Griever Hole!"

Thomas looked away from him back at the approaching warriors. They were only a metre or so away. He gripped his poor excuse for a spear.

We have to stay close together he told Teresa. *Let them do the fighting. We have to get through that Hole. He'll take a coward, but he knew that any fighting and any deaths would be in vain if they didn't get that cave punched get the door to the Creators opened.*

I know, she replied. *Stick together.*

"Ready," Mary yelled next to Thomas, raising his barbed wire-wrapped club into the air with one hand and a long silver knife in the other. He pointed the knife at the horde of Greivers; a flash ginted off the blade. "Yon."

The Keeper ran forward without waiting for a response. Newt went after him right on his heels and then the rest of the lagers followed a tight pack of roaring boys charging ahead to a bloody battle weapons meet. Thomas held Teresa's hand, let them all go past, let them bump him, smelled their sweat, sensed their terror, waiting for the perfect opportunity to make his own dash.

Just as the first sounds of boys crashing into Greivers filled the air, pierced with screams and roars, it matched every one would back up, gasp, step. Chuck ran past Thomas, who quickly reached out and grabbed his arm.

Chuck spun backward, then looked up at Thomas. His eyes so full of fright. Thomas did something shatter in his heart. In that split second, he made a decision.

"Stick together with me and Teresa," he said forcefully with authority, leaving no room for doubt.

Chuck looked ahead at the engaged battle. "But—" He trailed off and Thomas knew the boy's shame that he was ashamed to admit it.

Thomas quickly tried to save his dignity. "We need your help in the Greaver Hole in case one of those things is in there waiting for us."

Chuck nodded quickly – not quickly. Again, Thomas felt the pang of sadness in his heart, felt the urge to get Chuck home safely stronger than he'd ever felt it before.

"Okay then," Thomas said. Hold Teresa's other hand. Let's go."

Chuck did as he was told, trying so hard to act brave. And, Thomas noted, not saying a word – perhaps for the first time in his life.

They've made an opening! Teresa shouted in Thomas's mind. It sent a quick snap of pain shooting through his skull. She pointed ahead, and Thomas saw the narrow aisle forming in the middle of the corridor, Gladers fighting wildly to push the Grievors towards the walls.

"Now!" Thomas shouted.

He sprinted ahead, pulling Teresa behind him, Teresa pulling Chuck behind her, running at full speed, spears and knives cocked for battle, forward into the bloody, screaming, led hallway of stone. Towards the Cliff.

War raged around them. Gladers fought, panic-induced adrenaline driving them on. The sounds echoing off the walls were a cacophony of terror – of man screams, metal clashing against metal, motors roaring, the haunted shrieks of the Grievors, saws spinning, claws claspng, boys yelling for help. All was a blur, bloody and grey and flashes of steel. Thomas tried not to look left or right, only ahead, through the narrow gap formed by the Gladers.

Even as they ran, Thomas went through the code words again in his mind. *LOAD, CATCH, BULLETS, DEATH, SHIT, PUSH.* They just had to make it a few tens of metres more.

Something just saved my arm! Teresa screamed. Even as she said it, Thomas felt a sharp stab in his leg. He didn't stop, he didn't bother answering. The seething, maddeningly close predicament was like a heavy deluge of black water flooding around him, dragging him towards surrender. He fought it, pushed himself forward.

There was the Cliff opening out into a grey dark sky, about six metres away. He surged ahead, pulling his friends.

Blades clashed on both sides of them. Thomas refused to look, refused to help. A Griever spun directly in his path, a boy, his face hidden from sight, was clutched in its claws, scrabbling viciously. To the duck, whitish skin, trying to escape. Thomas dodged to the left, kept running. He heard a shriek as he passed by, a throat-scorching war, that could only mean the Grader had lost the fight, met a horrific end. The scream ran on, shattering the air, overpowering the other sounds of war, then it faded in death. Thomas felt his heart tremble, hoped it wasn't someone he knew.

Just keep going! Teresa said.

"I know." Thomas shouted back, this time out loud.

Someone sprinted past Thomas, bumped him. A Griever charged in from the right, blades twirling. A Grader cut it off, attacked it with two long swords, metal clanking and clanging as they fought. Thomas heard a distant voice, screaming the same words, over and over, something about him. About protecting him as he ran. It was Marie, desperation and fatigue radiant in his shouts.

Thomas kept going.

One almost got it made. Teresa yelled, a violent echo in his head.

More Grievors came at them, more Graders heaped. Weapons and picked up. A boy's bow and arrow, flinging the steel-pointed shafts at anything non-human that moved, missing more than he hit. Boys Thomas didn't know ran alongside him, whacking at Griever instruments with the reckless flailing of weapons, jumping on them, attacking. The sounds—clashes, clangs, screams, moaning wails, roars of engines, spinning saws, snapping blades, the screech of spikes against the floor, hair-raising pleas for help—all grew to a crescendo, became unbearable.

Thomas screamed, but he kept running and they made it

to the Cliff. He skidded to a stop, right on the edge. Teresa and Chuck bumped into him, almost sending all three of them to an endless fall. In a split second, Thomas surveyed his view of the Griever Hole. Hanging out, in the middle of thin air, were ivy vines stretching to nowhere.

Earlier, Minho and a couple of Runners had panned out ropes of ivy and knotted them to vines still attached to the walls. They'd then tossed the loose ends over the Cliff until they hit the Griever Hole, where now six or seven vines ran from the stone edge to an invisible target square, hovering in the empty sky where they disappeared into nothingness.

It was time to jump. Thomas hesitated, feeling one last moment of stark error - hearing the horrible sounds behind him, seeing the flash of light in front of him - then snapped out of it. "You first, Teresa." He wanted to go last to make sure a Griever didn't get her or Chuck.

To his surprise, she didn't hesitate. After squeezing Thomas's hand, then Chuck's shoulder, she leaped off the edge, immediately stiffening her legs, with her arms by her sides. Thomas held his breath until she slipped into the spot between the cut-off ivy ropes and disappeared - looked as if she'd been erased from existence with one quick swipe.

"Whoa!" Chuck yelled, the slightest hint of his old self breaking through.

"Whoa's right," Thomas said. "You're next."

Before the boy could argue, Thomas grabbed him under his arms, squeezed Chuck's torso. "Push off with your legs and I'll give you a lift. Ready? One, two, *three*!" He grunted with effort, heaved him over towards the Hole.

Chuck screamed as he flew through the air, and he almost missed the target - but his feet went through, then his stomach and arms slammed against the sides of the invisible hole before he disappeared inside. The boy's bravery sold itself something in Thomas's heart. He loved the kid. He loved him as if they had the same mum.

Thomas tightened the straps on his rucksack, held his makeshift fighting spear tightly in his right fist. The sounds behind him were awful, horrible. He felt guilty for not helping. *Just do your part,* he told himself.

Seeing his nerves, he pressed his spear against the stone ground, then planted his left foot on the very edge of the Cliff and jumped, catapulting up and into the twilight air. He pulled the spear close to his torso, pointed his toes downwards, stiffened his body.

Then he hit the Ho-

CHAPTER 57

A line of icy cold shot across Thomas's skin as he entered the Greiver Hole, starting from his toes and continuing up his whole body, as if he'd jumped through a flat plane of freezing water. The world went even darker around him as his feet thumped to a landing on a slippery surface, then shot out from under him, he fell backwards into Teresa's arms. She and Chuck helped him stand. It was a miracle Thomas hadn't stabbed someone's eye out with his spear.

The Greiver Hole would have been pitch-black if not for the beam of Teresa's torch cutting through the darkness. As Thomas got his bearings, he realised they were standing in a three-metre-high stone cylinder. It was damp and covered in shiny, grimy oil, and it stretched out in front of them for dozens of metres before it faded into darkness. Thomas peered up at the Hole through which they'd come. It looked like a square window into a deep, starless space.

"The computers over there," Teresa said, grabbing his attention.

A couple of metres down the tunnel, she had aimed her light at a small square of grimy glass that shone a dull green colour. Beneath it, a keyboard was set into the wall, angling out enough for someone to type on it with ease if standing. There it was, ready for the code. Thomas couldn't help thinking it seemed too easy, too good to be true.

"Put the words in!" Chuck yelled, slapping Thomas on the shoulder. "Hurry!"

Thomas motioned for Teresa to do it. "Chuck and I'll keep watch, make sure a Griever doesn't come through the Hole." He just hoped the Gladers had turned their attention from making the aisle in the Maze to keeping the creatures away from the Cliff.

"Okay," Teresa said. Thomas knew she was too smart to waste time arguing about it. She stepped up to the keyboard and screen, then started typing.

What Thomas called to her in his head. *Are you sure you know the words?*

She turned to him and smiled. "I'm not an idiot, Tom. Yes. I'm perfectly capable of remembering—"

A loud bang from above and behind them cut her off, made Thomas jump. He spun around to see a Griever pop through the Griever Hole, appearing as if by magic from the dark square of black. The thing had retracted its spikes and arms to enter, when it landed with a sickening thump, a dozen sharp and nasty objects popped back out, looking deadlier than ever.

Thomas pushed a hunk behind him and faced the creature, holding out his spear as if that would ward it off. "Just keep typing, Teresa!" he yelled.

A skinny metal rod burst out of the Gnievers moist skin, unfolding into a long appendage with three spinning blades which moved directly towards Thomas's face.

He gripped the end of his spear with both hands, squeezing tighter as he lowered the knife-faced point to the ground in front of him. The blades came moved within two feet, ready to slice

his skin to bits. When it was just half a metre away Thomas tensed his muscles and swung the spear up, around, and towards the ceiling as hard as he could. It smacked the metal arm and pivoted the thing skyward, revolving in an arc until it slammed back into the body of the Griever. The monster let out an angry shriek and pulled back a few metres, its spikes retracting into its body. Thomas heaved breaths in and out.

Maybe I can hold it off he said quickly to Teresa. *Just hurry! I'm almost done* she replied.

The Griever's spikes appeared again, it surged ahead and another arm popped out of its skin and shot forward. This one with huge claws, snapping to grab the spear. Thomas swung, this time from above his head, throwing every bit of strength into the attack. The spear crashed into the base of the claws. With a loud clunk, and then a squishing sound, the entire arm ripped free of its socket, falling to the floor. Then, from some kind of mouth that Thomas couldn't see, the Griever let out a long, piercing shriek and pulled back again, the spikes disappeared.

"These things are beatable!" Thomas shouted.

It won't let me enter the last word! Teresa said in his mind.

Barely hearing her, not quite understanding, he let out a roar and charged ahead to take advantage of the Griever's moment of weakness. Swinging his spear wildly, he jumped on top of the creature's bulbous body, whacking two metal arms away from him with a loud crack. He lifted the spear above his head, braced his feet, let them sink into the disgusting rubber, then thrust the spear down and into the monster. A slimy yellow goop exploded from the flesh, splashing over Thomas's legs as he drove the spear as far as it would sink into the thing's body. Then he released the hilt of the weapon and jumped away, running back to Chuck and Teresa.

Thomas watched in sick fascination as the Griever twitched uncontrollably, spewing the yellow ooze in every direction. Spikes popped in and out of the skin, its remaining arms swung around in mass confusion at times impacting its own body.

Soon it began to slow, losing energy with every ounce of blood – or fuel – it lost.

A few seconds later it stopped moving altogether. Thomas couldn't believe it. He also likely couldn't believe it. He'd just defeated a Griever, one of the monsters that had terrorised the Gladers for more than two years.

He glanced behind him at Chuck, standing there with eyes wide.

"You killed it," the boy said. He laughed, as if that one act had solved all their problems.

"Wasn't so hard," Thomas muttered, then turned to see Teresa frantically typing away at the keyboard. He knew immediately that something was wrong.

"What's the problem?" he asked, almost shouting. He ran up to look over her shoulder and saw that she kept typing the word *Pt. H* over and over but nothing appeared on the screen.

She pointed at the dirty square of glass, empty but for its greenish glow of life. "I put in all the words and one by one they appeared on the screen, then something beeped and they'd disappear. But it won't let me type in the last word. Nothing's happening!"

Cold filled Thomas's veins as Teresa's words sank in. "Well, why?"

"I don't know!" She tried again, then again. Nothing appeared.

"Thomas!" Chuck screamed from behind them. Thomas turned to see him pointing at the Griever Hole – another creature was making its way through. As he watched, it plopped down on top of its dead brother and another Griever started entering the Hole.

"What's taking so long?" Chuck cried frantically. "You said they'd turn off when you punched in the code!"

Both Grievers had tightened themselves and extended their spikes, but started moving towards them.

"I won't let us enter the word *Pt. H*!" Thomas said.

absentely, now really speaking to Chuck but trying to think of a solution.

I don't get it, Teresa said.

The Grievors were coming, only a couple of metres away. Feeling his will fade into blackness, Thomas braced his feet and held up his fists half-heartedly. It was supposed to work. The code was supposed to—

"Maybe you should just push that button," Chuck said.

Thomas was so surprised by the random statement that he turned away from the Grievors, looked at the boy. Chuck was pointing at a spot near the floor, right underneath the screen and keyboard.

Before he could move, Teresa was already down there, crouching on her knees. And consumed by curiosity, by a fleeting hope, Thomas joined her, collapsing on the ground to get a better look. He heard the Griever in an odd roar behind him, felt a sharp claw grab his shirt, felt a prick of pain. But he could only stare.

A small red button was set into the wall only a few centimetres above the floor. Three black words were printed here so obvious he couldn't believe he'd missed it earlier.

Kill the Maze

More pain slapped Thomas out of his stupor. The Griever had grabbed him with two instruments, had started dragging him backwards. The other one had gone after Chuck and was just about to swipe at the kid with a long blade.

A button.

"Push!" Thomas screamed louder than he'd thought it possible for a human being to scream.

And Teresa did.

She pushed the button and everything went perfectly silent. Then, from somewhere down the dark tunnels, came the sound of a door sliding open.

CHAPTER 58

Amost at once the Grievors had shut down completely. Their instruments sucked back through their blabbery skin, their lights burned off their inside machines dead quiet. And that door.

Thomas fell on the floor after being released by his captors' claws, and despite the pain of several lacerations across his back and shoulders, elation surged through him so strong, he didn't know how to react. He gasped, then laughed, then choked on a sob before laughing again.

Chack had scooted away from the Grievors, bumping into Teresa. She held him up by squeezing him in a fierce hug.

"You did it, Chack," Teresa said. "We were so worried about the stupid code words, we didn't know to look around for something to *prob* the last word, the last piece of the puzzle."

Thomas laughed again, and belatedly that such a thing could be possible so soon after what they'd gone through. "She's right, Chack. You saved us, man. *can* you we needed you."

Thomas scrambled to his feet, and joined the other two in a

group hug, almost delicious. "Chucks a shucking hero!"

What about the others?" Teresa said with a nod towards the Griever Hole. Thomas felt his ears on wather and he stepped back and turned towards the Hole.

As an answer to her question, someone fell through the black square. It was Minho, looking as if he'd been stretched or stabbed on ninety per cent of his body.

"Minho!" Thomas shouted, filled with relief. "Are you okay? What about everybody else?"

Minho stumbled towards the curved wall of the tunnel. Ten leaned there, gulping big breaths. "We lost a ton of people. It's a mess of blood up there. . . . then they all just shut down." He paused, taking in a really deep breath and letting it go in a rush that said "You did it. I can't believe it actually worked."

Newt came through then, followed by Frypan. Then Winston and others. Before long eighteen boys had joined Thomas and his friends in the tunnel, making a total of twenty-one Gladders in all. Every last one of those who'd stayed behind and fought was covered in whatever savage and human blood their clothes ripped to shreds.

"The rest?" Thomas asked, terrified of the answer.

"Half of us," Newt said, his voice weak. "Dead."

No one said a word then. No one said a word for a very long time.

"You know what?" Minho said, standing up a little taller. "Half might've died, but half of us shucking lived. And nobody got stung - just like Thomas thought. We've gotta get out of here."

Too many. Thomas thought. *Too many by far.* His joy dribbled away, turned into a deep mourning for the twenty people who'd lost their lives. Despite the alternative, despite knowing that if they hadn't tried to escape, *all* of them might've died, it still hurt even though he hadn't known them very well. Such a display of death. . . how could it be considered a victory?

"Let's get out of here," Newt said "Right now."

"Where do we go?" Muho asked.

Thomas poured down the long tunnel. "I heard the door open down that way." He tried to push away the ache of it all the horrors of the battle they'd just won. The losses. He pushed it away knowing they were nowhere near safe yet.

"Well... let's go," Muho answered. And the older boy turned and started walking up the tunnel without waiting for a response.

Newt nodded, ushering the other Leaders past him to follow. One by one they went until only he remained with Thomas and Teresa.

"I'll go last," Thomas said.

No one argued. Newt went then Chuck, then Teresa, into the black tunnel. Even the torches seemed to get swallowed by the darkness. Thomas followed, not even bothering to look back at the dead Grievets.

After a minute or so of walking, he heard a shriek from ahead, followed by another, then another. The cries faded as if they were fading...

Murmurs made their way down the line, and finally Teresa turned to Thomas. "Looks like it ends in a side up there, shooting downwards."

Thomas's stomach turned at the thought. It seemed like it was a game... for whoever had built the place at least.

One by one he heard the Leaders' dwindling shouts and huts up ahead. Then it was Newt's turn, then Chuck's. Teresa's he never got down on a steeply descending, slick black chute of metal.

Guess we have no choice she said. It is my mind.

Guess not. But this had a strong feeling it wasn't a way out of his nightmare. He just hoped it'd lead to another pack of Grievets.

Teresa slipped down the side with an almost cheerful shriek and... but as Thomas, her partner, he could talk a mad

out of it – anything was better than the Maze.

His body shot down a steep decline slick with an oily goo that smelled awful – like burnt plastic and overused machinery. He twisted his body until he got his feet in front of him, then tried to hold his hands out to slow himself down. It was useless – the greasy stuff covered every centimetre of the stone he couldn't grip anything.

The screams of the other Gladiators echoed off the tunnel walls as they slid down the oily chute. Panic gripped Thomas's heart. He couldn't fight off the image that they'd been swallowed by some gigantic beast and were sliding down its long oesophagus, about to land in its stomach at any second. And as if his thoughts had materialised, the smells changed – to something more like maldew and rot. He started gagging, a look of his effort not to throw up on himself.

The tunnel began to twist, turning in a rough spiral. Just enough to slow them down – and Thomas's feet smacked right into Teresa, hitting her in the head; he recoiled and a feeling of complete misery sank over him. They were still falling. Time seemed to stretch out – endless.

Around and around they went down the tube. Nausea burned in his stomach – the squashing of the goo against his body, the smell, the circling motion. He was just about to turn his head to the side to throw up when Teresa let out a sharp cry.

This time there was no echo. A second later, Thomas flew out of the tunnel and landed on her.

Bodies scrambled everywhere – people on top of people, groaning and squirming in confusion as they tried to push away from each other. Thomas wiggled his arms and legs to scoot away from Teresa, then crawled a couple of metres more to throw up, emptying his stomach.

Still shuddering from the experience, he wiped at his mouth with his hand, only to realise it was covered in slimy filth. He sat up, rubbing both hands on the ground, and he finally got a good look at where they'd arrived. As he gaped, he saw, also,

that everyone else had pulled themselves together into a group, taking in the new surroundings.

Thomas had seen glimpses of it during the Changing, but didn't truly remember until that very moment.

They were in a huge underground chamber big enough to hold nine or ten Homesteads. From top to bottom, each side, the place was covered in all kinds of machinery and wires and dials and computers. On one side of the room, to his right, there was a row of forty or so large white pods that looked like enormous coffins. Across from that on the other side stood large glass doors, although the lighting made it impossible to see what was on the other side.

"Look!" someone shouted, but he'd already seen it, his breath catching in his throat. Goosebumps broke out all over him, a creepy feeling crawling down his spine like a wet spider.

Directly in front of them, a row of twenty or so dark, tinted windows stretched across the compound, horizontally one after the other. Behind each one a person—some men, some women, all of them pale and thin—sat, observing the Quakers, staring through the glass with squinted eyes. Thomas shuddered, terrified. They all looked like ghosts. Angry, starving, sinister apparitions of people who'd never been happy when alive, much less dead.

But Thomas knew they were not, of course, ghosts. They were the people who'd sent them all to the vault. The people who'd taken their lives away from them.

The Creators

CHAPTER 59

Thomas took a step backwards, not letting others do the same. A deadly silence sucked the life out of the air as every last Glader stared at the row of windows, at the row of observers. Thomas watched one of them look down to write something, and then reach up and put on a pair of glasses. They all wore black coats over white shirts, a word stitched on their right breast – he couldn't quite make out what it said. None of them wore any kind of discernible facial expression – they were all sad, w and gaunt, miserably sad to look upon.

They continued to stare at the Gladers: a man shook his head, a woman nodded. Another man reached up and scratched his nose – the most human thing Thomas had seen any of them do.

"Who are those people?" Chuck whispered, but his voice echoed throughout the chamber with a raspy edge.

"The Creators," Minke said, then he spat on the floor. "I'm gonna break your faces," he screamed so loudly Thomas almost held his hands over his ears.

"What do we do?" Thomas asked. "What are they waiting for?"

"They've probably revved the trackers back up," Newt said. "They're probably coming right now."

A loud, slow, creeping sound cut him off. Like there was a big alarm that got stuck driving in reverse but much more powerful. It came from everywhere, booming and echoing through the chamber.

"What now?" Chuck asked, a growing concern in his voice.

For some reason everyone looked at Thomas. He shrugged in answer, and he remembered so much, and now he was just as clueless as anyone else. Anna stared. He scanned the room as he scanned the place top to bottom, trying to find the source of the beeps. But ~~nothing~~ had changed. ~~On one of the corners~~ of his eye he noticed the other students looking in the direction of the doors. He did as well: his heart quavered when he saw that one of the doors was swinging open towards them.

The beeping stopped, and a silence as deep as outer space settled on the chamber. Thomas waited without breathing, traced a road that seemed impossible to come filling through the door.

Instead, two people walked out the room.

One was a woman. As she grew up, she seemed very mature, wearing black pants and a ~~black~~ down white shirt with a logo in the chest. What KID spoke of in the capture letters. The brown hair was cut at the shoulders and she had a ~~calm~~ face with ~~dark~~ eyes. As she walked towards the group, she neither smiled nor frowned. It was almost as if she didn't mind or care that they were standing there.

~~I know her~~ Thomas thought. But it was a cloudy kind of recollection. He couldn't remember her name or what she had to do with the Maze, but she seemed familiar. And not just her looks, but the way she walked, her mannerisms, still without

a hint of joy. She stopped a few metres in front of the Gladers and slowly looked left to right, taking them all in.

The other person, standing next to her, was a boy wearing an overly large sweatshirt, its hood pulled up over his head, concealing his face.

"Welcome back," the woman finally said. "Over two years, and so few dead. Amazing."

Thomas felt his mouth drop open. His anger reddened his face.

"Excuse me?" Newt asked.

Her eyes scanned the crowd again before falling on Newt. "Everything has gone according to plan. Mr. Newton. Although we expected a few more of you to give up along the way."

She glanced over at her companion, then reached out and pulled the hood off the boy. He looked up, his eyes wet with tears. Every Glader in the room sucked in a breath of surprise. Thomas felt his knees buckle.

It was Gally.

Thomas blinked, then rubbed his eyes like something out of a cartoon. He was consumed with shock and anger.

It was Gally.

"What's he doing here?" Minho shouted.

"You're safe now," the woman responded as if she hadn't heard him. "Please, be at ease."

"At ease?" Minho barked. "Who are you telling us to be at ease? We want to see the police, the mayor, the president, somebody!" Thomas worried what Minho might do. Then again, Thomas kind of wanted him to go and punch her in the face.

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at Minho. "You have no idea what you're talking about, boy. I'd expect more maturity from someone who's passed the Maze Trials." Her condescending tone shocked Thomas.

Minho started to retort, but Newt elbowed him in the gut.

"Cady," Newt said, "What's going on?"

The dark haired boy looked at him, his eyes flared for a moment, his head shaking slightly. But he didn't respond. *Something's off with him.* Thomas thought. Worse than before.

The woman nodded as if proud of him. "One day you'll all be grateful for what we've done for you. I can only promise this and trust your minds to accept it. If you don't, then the whole thing was a mistake. I ask times, Mr Newton. Dark times."

She paused. "There is, of course, one final variable." She stepped back.

Thomas was focused on Cady. The boy's white body trembled, his face pasty white, making his wet red eyes stand out. The bloody splashes on paper. His lips pressed together, the skin around them twitched as if he were trying to speak but couldn't.

"Cady?" Thomas asked, trying to suppress the complete hatred he had for him.

Words burst from Cady's mouth. "They can control me."

"I don't..." His eyes bulged, a hand went to his throat as if he were choking. "I have to go." Then there was a creaking cough. When he stilled, his face calming, his body relaxing, it was just like Abby. He'd backed out of a lane, after he went through the Changing. The same type of thing had happened to him. What did it

But Thomas didn't have time to finish his thought. Cady reached behind himself, pulled something long and thin from his back pocket. The lights of the chamber flashed off the silver surface. A wicked-looking dagger gripped tightly in his fingers. With unexpected speed, he reared back and threw the knife at Thomas. As he did so, Thomas heard a shout to his right, *serse! moment.* Towards him.

The blade whizzed, as every turn was one to Thomas, as if the world had turned to slow motion. As it did so, for the sole purpose of allowing him to feel the terror of seeing such a thing. On the knife came, flipping over and over, straight at him. A strangled cry was forming in his throat. He urged

himself to move but he couldn't.

Then, inexplicably Chuck was there, diving in front of him. Thomas felt as if his feet had been frozen in blocks of ice; he could only stare at the scene of horror unfolding before him, completely helpless.

With a sickening wet thump, the dagger stabbed into Chuck's chest, burying itself to the hilt. The boy screamed, fell to the floor, his body already convulsing. Blood poured from the wound, dark crimson. His legs sapped against the floor, feet kicking aimlessly with onrushing death. Red spit nozzled from between his lips. Thomas felt as if the world were collapsing around him, crushing his heart.

He fell to the ground, pulled Chuck's shaking body into his arms.

"Chuck!" he screamed, his voice felt like acid ripping through his throat. "Chuck!"

The boy shook uncontrollably, blood everywhere, wetting Thomas's hands. Chuck's eyes had rolled up to their sockets, dull white orbs. Blood trickled out of his nose and mouth.

"Chuck . . ." Thomas said, this time a whisper. There had to be something they could do. They could save him. They . . .

The boy stopped convulsing, stilled. His eyes slid back into normal position, focused on Thomas, clinging to life. "Thomas . . ." it was one word, barely there.

"Hang on, Chuck," Thomas said. "Don't die. Fight it. *Someone get help!*"

Nobody moved, and deep inside, Thomas knew why. Nothing *could* help now. It was over. Black spots swam before Thomas's eyes, the room tilted and swayed. *No*, he thought. *Not Chuck. Not Chuck. Anyone but Chuck.*

"Thomas," Chuck whispered. "Find . . . my mum." A racking cough burst from his lungs, throwing a spray of blood. "Let her go."

He didn't finish. His eyes closed, his body went limp. One last breath wheezed from his mouth.

Thomas stared at him, stared at his friend's lifeless body.

Something happened with Thomas. It started deep down in his chest, a seed of rage, of revenge, of hate. Something dark, monstrous. And then it exploded, bursting through his lungs, through his neck, through his arms and legs. Through his mind.

He swung at back, stood up trembling, turned his face toward his new visitors.

And then Thomas snapped. He completely and utterly snapped.

He rushed forward, threw himself on Calv, grasping with his fingers, his claws. He found the boy's throat, squeezed, forced him to the ground in top of him. He straddled the boy's chest, gripped him with his legs so he could not escape. Thomas started punching.

He held Calv down with his left hand, pushing down on the boy's neck, as his right fist rained punches upon Calv's face. One after another. Down and down and down, slamming his balled knuckles into the boy's cheek and nose. There was crunching, there was blood, there were terrible screams. Thomas didn't know which were louder. Calv's or his own. He beat him, beat him as he released every ounce of rage he'd ever owned.

And then he was being pulled away by Minho and Newt. His arms still flailing even when the only hand they dragged him across the floor. He fought, there was no need, yelped to be let alone. His eyes remained on Calv, lying there, still. Thomas continued to harried pouring out, as if a volcano, the same name connected them.

And then, just like that, it all vanished. There were no thoughts of Chuck.

He threw off Minho's and Newt's grip, ran to the limp, lifeless body. He found it, grabbed him, pulled him back and his arms, gnoring the ground, gnoring the frozen look of death on the boy's face.

"No!" Thomas shouted, mindless concerning him. "No!"

Teresa was there, put her hand on his shoulder. He shook it away.

"I promised him!" he screamed, realising even as he did so that his voice was laden with something wrong. Almost instantly "I promised I'd save him, take him home! I *promised* him!"

Teresa didn't respond, only nodded, her eyes cast to the ground.

Thomas hugged Chuck to his chest, squeezed him as tightly as possible as if that could somehow bring him back, or show thanks for saying it, or for being his friend when no one else would.

He had cried, wept once he'd never wept before. His great creaking joints ached, through the cold he felt like the sound of tortured pain.

CHAPTER 60

He finally pulled it all back into his heart, sucking in the painful tide of his misery. In the Cade, Chuck had become a symbol for him—a beacon that somehow they could make everything right again in the world. Sleep in beds. Get kissed goodnight. Have bacon and eggs for breakfast, go to a real school. Be happy.

But now Chuck was gone. And his lumpy body, in which Thomas still clung, seemed a cold talisman— that not only would those dreams of a hopeful future never come to pass, but that he had never been that way in the first place. That even in escape, dreary days lay ahead. A tide of sorrow.

For returning men, it was surely a hell. But not much good floated in the muck.

Thomas reeled in the pain, tucked it somewhere deep inside him. He did it for Teresa. For Newt and Mpho. Whatever darkness awaited them, they'd be together, and that was all that mattered right then.

He let go of Chuck, slumped backwards, trying not to look

at the boy's shirt, black with blood. He wiped the tears from his cheeks, rubbed his eyes, thinking he should be embarrassed, but not feeling that way. Finally he looked up. Looked up at Teresa and her enormous blue eyes heavy with sadness—just as much for him as for Chuck, he was sure of it.

She reached down, grabbed his hand, helped him stand. Once he was up, she didn't let go, and neither did he. He squeezed, tried to say what he felt by doing so. No one else said a word, most of them staring at Chuck's body without expression, as if they'd moved far beyond feeling. No one looked at Gaby, breathing but still.

The woman from WICKED broke the silence.

"All things happen for a purpose," she said, any sign of malice now gone from her voice. "You must understand this."

Thomas looked at her, threw all his compressed hatred into the glare. But he did nothing.

Teresa placed her other hand on his arm, gripped his bicep. *What now?* she asked.

I don't know, he replied, *I can't—*

His sentence was cut short by a sudden series of shouts and commotion outside the entrance through which the woman had come. She visibly panicked, the blood draining from her face as she turned towards the door. Thomas followed her gaze.

Several men and women dressed in grimy jeans and soaking wet coats burst through the entrance with guns raised, yelling and screaming words over each other. It was impossible to understand what they were saying. Their guns—some were rifles, other pistols—looked—artificial plastic. Almost like toys abandoned in the woods for years, recently discovered by the next generation of kids ready to play war.

Thomas stared in shock as two of the newcomers tackled the WICKED woman to the floor. Then one stepped back and drew up his gun, aimed.

No way, Thomas thought. *No—*

Flashes in the air as several shots exploded from the gun.

s slamming into the woman's body. She was dead, a bloody mess.

Thomas took several steps backwards, almost stumbled.

A man walked up to the Gladers as the others in his group spread out around them, sweeping their guns etc and right as they shot at the observation windows, shattering them. Thomas heard screams, saw himed, broken away, focused on the man who approached them. He had dark hair, his face young but full of wrinkles around the eyes, as if he'd spent each day of his life worrying about how to make it to the next.

"We don't have time to explain," the man said, his voice as strained as his face. "Just follow me and run like your life depends on it. Because it does."

With that the man made a few motions to his companions, then turned and ran out of the big glass doors, his gun held rigidly before him. Gritting and cries of agony still rattled the chamber, but Thomas did his best to ignore them and follow instructions.

"Go!" one of the rescuers—that was the only way Thomas could think of them—screamed from behind.

After the briefest hesitation, the Gladers followed, almost stomping each other in their haste to get out of the chamber as far away from the Grievors and the Maze as possible. Thomas, his hands still gripping Teresas, ran with them, bunched up in the back of the group. They had no choice but to leave Chuck's body behind.

Thomas felt no emotion—he was completely numb. He ran down a long hallway, into a dimly lit tunnel. Up a winding flight of stairs. Everything was dark, smelled like electronics. Down another hallway. Up more stairs. More hallways. Thomas wanted to ache for Chuck, get excited about their escape, rejoice that Teresa was there with him. But he'd seen too much. There was only emptiness now. A void. He kept going.

On they ran, some of the men and women leading from ahead, some yelling encouragement from behind.

They reached another set of glass doors and went through

them into a massive downpour of rain, falling from a black sky. No lightning was visible but occasional sparkles flashing off the howling sheets of water.

The leader didn't stop moving until they reached a huge bus, its sides dented and scorched, most of the windows wetted with cracks. Rain slid down its side, making Thomas imagine a huge beast crawling out of the ocean.

"Get on!" the man screamed. "Hurry!"

They did, forming into a tight pack behind the leader as they entered one by one. It seemed to take forever. Leaders pushing and straining to get everyone past the three suits and onto the seats.

Thomas was at the back, Teresa right in front of him. Thomas looked up into the sky, felt the water beat against his face. It was warm, almost hot, had a weird thickness to it. Suddenly he felt break him out of his funk, snap him to attention. Maybe it was just the ferocity of the deluge. He focused on the bus, on Teresa, on escape.

They were almost to the door when a hand suddenly slammed against his shoulder, gripping his shirt. He cried out as someone jerked him backwards, ripping his hand out of Teresa's. He saw her spin around, just in time to watch as he slammed into the ground, throwing up a spray of water. A moment of pain shot down his spine as a woman's head appeared five feet in nettes above him, upside down, hanging out of a crack.

Greasy hair hanging down, reaching Thomas, turning a face hidden in shadow. A horrible stench filled his nostrils, like eggs and rot, a gaseous rot. The woman pulled back enough for someone's torch to reveal her features: pale, wrinkly skin, covered in sores, some oozing with pus. She, in terror-faced Thomas, froze him.

"Gonna save us all," the hideous woman said, spitting out a hot, moist spray at Thomas. "Gonna save us from the flare!" She laughed, no much more, and disappeared.

The woman yelped when one of the rescuers grabbed her with both hands and yanked her off Thomas, who recovered his

was and scrambled to his feet. He backed into Teresa, staring as the man dragged the woman away, her legs kicking out weakly, her eyes on Thomas. She pointed at him, called out, "Don't believe a word they tell ya. Gonna save us from the Flare, ya are!"

When the man was several metres from the bus, he tossed the woman to the ground. "Stay put or I'll shoot you dead," he yelled at her. Then he turned to Thomas. "Get on the bus."

Thomas, so terrified by the ordeal, that his body shook, turned and followed Teresa up the stairs and into the aisle of the bus. Wide eyes watched him as they walked all the way to the back seat and plumped down. They huddled together. Black water washed down the windows outside. The rain drummed on the roof; heavy thunder shook the skies above them.

What was that? Teresa said in his mind.

Thomas couldn't answer, just shook his head. Thoughts of Chuck flooded him again, replacing the crazy woman, deadening his heart. He just didn't care. Didn't feel any relief at escaping the Maze. *Chuck.*

One of the rescuers, a woman, sat across from Thomas and Teresa, the leader who'd spoken to them earlier, climbed onto the bus and took a seat at the wheel, cranked up the engine. The bus started rolling forward.

Just as it did, Thomas saw a flash of movement outside the window. The sore-riddled woman had got to her feet, was sprinting towards the front of the bus, waving her arms wildly, screaming, something drowned out by the sounds of the storm. Her eyes were lit with frenzy or terror. Thomas left her to it, which.

He leaned towards the glass of the window as she disappeared from his view up ahead.

"Wait!" The gasp leaked, but no one heard him. Or, they did, they didn't care.

The driver gunned the engine, the bus lurched as it slammed into the woman's body. A warp almost jolted

Thomas out of his seat as the front wheels ran over her, quickly followed by a second thump—the back wheels. Thomas looked at Teresa, saw the sickle new look on her face that sharply mirrored his own.

Without a word, the driver kept his foot on the gas and the bus ploughed forward, driving off into the rain, sweeping it

CHAPTER 61

The next hour or so was a blur of sights and sounds for Thomas.

The driver drove at reckless speeds, through towns and cities, the heavy rain obscuring most of the view. Lights and buildings were warped and watery, like something out of a drug-induced hallucination. At one point people outside rushed the bus, their clothes tarry, hair matted to their heads, strange sores like those Thomas had seen on the woman covering their terrified faces. They pounded on the sides of the vehicle as if they wanted to get on, wanted to escape whatever horrible lives they were living.

The bus never slowed. Teresa remained silent next to Thomas.

He finally got up enough nerve to speak to the woman sitting across the aisle.

"What's going on?" he asked, not sure how else to pose it.

The woman looked over at him. Wet black hair hung in strings around her face. Dark eyes full of sorrow. "That's a very

ong story." The woman's voice came out much kinder than Thomas had expected, giving him hope that she truly was a friend—that all of their rescuers were friends. Despite the fact that they'd run over a woman in cold blood.

"Please," Teresa said. "Please tell us something."

The woman looked back and forth between Thomas and Teresa, then let out a sigh. "It'll take a while before you get your memories back. I've seen—we're not scientists, we have no idea what they did to you, or how they did it."

Thomas's heart dropped at the thought of maybe having lost his memory for ever, but he pressed on. "Who are they?" he asked.

"It started with the sun flares," the woman said, her gaze growing distant.

"What—?" Teresa began, but Thomas shushed her.

Just let her talk, he said to her mind. *She looks like she will.*
Okay.

The woman almost seemed in a trance as she spoke, never taking her eyes off an indistinct spot in the distance. "The sun flares couldn't have been predicted. Sun flares are normal, but these were unprecedented, massive, spiking higher and higher—and once they were noticed, it was only minutes before their heat slammed into Earth. First our satellites were burned out, and thousands died instantly, millions within days, countless miles became wastelands. Then came the sickness."

She paused, took a breath. "As the ecosystem fell apart, it became impossible to control the sickness—even in kept-in South America. The jungles were gone, but the insects weren't. People call it the Flare now. It's a horrible, horrible thing. Only the richest can be treated, no one can be cured. Unless the rumours from the Andes are true."

Thomas almost broke his own advice—questions filled his mind. Horror grew in his heart. He sat and listened as the woman continued.

"As for you, all of you—you're just a few of millions."

organized. They tested thousands. Chose you for the big one. The ultimate test. Every bang you lived through was calculated and thought through. Calculations to study your reactions, your brain waves, your thoughts. All in an attempt to find those capable of being pinged as find a way to beat the Fare.

She paused again, pulled a string of hair behind her ear. "Most of the physical effects are caused by something else. First the delusions start, then animal instincts begin to overpower the human ones. Finally the closeness they destroy their humanity as well as in the brain. The Fare *ping* is the trigger. It is an awful thing. Better to die than catch it."

The woman broke her gaze into nothingness and focused on Thomas, then looked at Teresa, then Thomas again. "We won't let them do this to children. We've sworn our lives to fighting WILKED. We can't lose our humanity, no matter the end result."

She folded her hands in her lap, looked down at them.

"You learn more in time. We live far in the north. We're separated from the Andes by thousands of miles. They call it the Scorch - it lies between here and there. It's centred mainly around what they used to call the equator. It's just heat and dust now. Filled with savages consumed beyond help by the Fare. We're trying to cross that land to find the cure. But until then we'll fight WILKED and stop the experiments and tests." She looked carefully at Thomas, then Teresa. "It's our hope that you'll join us."

She looked away then, gazing out her window.

Thomas looked at Teresa, raised his eyebrows in question. She simply shook her head and then placed a unit on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

I'm too tired to think about it, she says. Let it not be safe for now.

Maybe we are, he replied. Maybe.

He heard the soft sounds of her sleep, but he knew that sleep would be impossible for him. He felt such a raging storm

of conflicting emotions, he couldn't identify any of them. Still, it was better than he'd avoid he'd experienced earlier. He could only sit and stare out of the window into the rain and blackness, pondering words like *Flare* and *irkness* and *experiment* and *Scorch* and *WICKED*. He could only sit and hope that things might be better now than they'd been in the Maze.

But as he jiggled and swayed with the movements of the bus, felt Teresa's head thump against his shoulder every once in a while when they hit big bumps, heard her stir and fall back to sleep, heard the murmurs of other conversations from other Gladers, his thoughts kept returning to one thing.

Chuck.

Two hours later, the bus stopped.

They had pulled into a muddy car park that surrounded a nondescript building with several rows of windows. The woman and other rescuers shuffled the nineteen boys and one girl through the front door and up a flight of stairs, then into a large dormitory with a series of bunk beds lined up along one of the walls. On the opposite side were some dressers and tables. Curtain-covered windows chequered each wall of the room.

Thomas took it all in with a distant and muted wonder. He was far past being surprised or overcome by anything ever again.

The place was full of colour. Bright yellow paint, red blankets, green curtains. After the drab greyness of the Glade, it was as if they'd been transported to a living rainbow. Seeing it all, seeing the beds and the dressers, all made up and fresh – the sense of normalcy was almost overwhelming. Too good to be true. Minho said it best on entering the new world: "We been shackled and gone to heaven."

Thomas found it hard to feel joy as if he'd betrayed Chuck by doing so. But there was something there. Something.

Their bus-driving leader left the Gladers in the hands of a

small staff – nine or ten men and women dressed in pressed black pants and white shirts, their hair trimmed and their faces and hands clean. They were smiling.

The chairs. The beds. The staff. Thomas felt an impossible happiness trying to break through to the inside of him. A enormous pain lurked in the middle of it, though. A dark depression that might never leave – the horror of a back and his brutal murder by sacrifice. But despite that, despite everything, despite all the women on the bus had said about the way they'd been treated, Thomas felt safe for the very first time since coming out of the Box.

Beds were assigned, clothes and bathroom things were passed out, dinner was served. Pizza. Real, bona fide glassy fingers pizza. Thomas devoured each bite, his anger ramping everything else, the mood of contentment and relief and his palpable. Most of the leaders had remained quiet throughout it all, perhaps worried that speaking would make everything worse. But there were plenty of smiles. Thomas had got so used to looks of despair, it was almost unsettling to see happy faces. Especially when he was having such a hard time helping himself.

Soon after eating, no one argued when they were told it was time for bed.

Calm – not Thomas. He felt as if he couldn't sleep for a month.

CHAPTER 62

Thomas shared a bunk with Minho, who insisted on sleeping up top. Newt and Frypan were right next to them. The staff put Teresa up in a separate room, shuffling her away before she could even say goodbye. Thomas missed her desperately three seconds after she was gone.

As Thomas was settling into the soft mattress for the night, he was interrupted.

"Hey, Thomas," Minho said from above him.

"Yeah?" Thomas was so tired, he word barely came out.

"What do you think happened to the Gladers who stayed behind?"

Thomas hadn't thought about it. His mind had been occupied with Chuck and now Teresa. "I don't know. But based on how many of us died getting here, I wouldn't like to be one of them right now. Grievers are probably swarming all over them." He couldn't believe how morose his voice sounded as he said it.

"You think we're safe with these people?" Minho asked.

Thomas pondered the question for a moment. There was only one answer to hold on to. "Yeah, I think we're safe."

Minho said something else, but Thomas didn't hear. Exhaustion consuming him, his mind wandered to his short career in the Maze, his time as a runner and how much he'd wandered—ever since his first night in the Maze it felt like a hundred years ago—like a dream.

Murmurs of conversation floated through the room, but to Thomas they seemed to come from another world. He stayed at the creaking wooden boards of the bed above him, feeling the pull of sleep. But, wanting to talk to Teresa, he fought it off.

How's your room? he asked, not his mind. *What you were in here.*

Oh, yeah, she replied. *With the roses—* *My boys, I love you.*

Cause you're right. I think he's the fastest three times in the last minute.

Thomas knew it was a lame attempt at a joke, but it was the best he could do. He sensed her laughing, wished he could do the same. There was a long pause. *Not really sorry about Chuck,* she finally said.

Thomas felt a sharp pang and closed his eyes as he sank deeper into the misery of the night. *He can't be so annoying,* he said. He paused, thought of his night when Chuck had scared the crap out of Gally in the bathroom. *But it hurts. Feels like I lost a brother.*

I know.

I promised—

Stop, Tom.

But he wasn't. Teresa, to make him feel better, say something vague to make the pain go away.

Snap with the promise, right? *Half of us made it. We all would've died if we'd stayed in the Maze.*

But Chuck didn't make it. Thomas said. *Cause it racked him because he knew for a certainty he wouldn't save any one of the*

Gladers in that room for Chuck

*He died saving you, Teresa said. He made the choice himself
Just don't ever waste it*

Thomas felt tears swell under his eyelids, one escaped and
trickled down his right temple, into his hair. A full minute
passed without any words between them. Then he said: *Teresa?*
Yeah?

Thomas was scared to share his thoughts, but then *I wanna
remember you. Remember us. Ya know, before*

Me too.

Seems like we He didn't know how to say it after all
I know.

*Wonder what tomorrow'll be like
We'll find out in a few hours.*

Yeah. Well, goodnight. He wanted to say more, much more.
But nothing came.

Goodnight, she said. Just as the lights went out.

Thomas rolled over, glad it was dark so no one could see the
look that had settled across his face.

It wasn't a smile exactly. Not quite a happy expression. But
a most.

And for now, a muse was good enough.

EPILOGUE

WICKED Memorandum Date 24.1.92 Time 22.45
TO: My Associates
FROM: Ava Page (wicked) 007
RE: EPILOGUE TO OUR MAZE TRIALS Group A

By a yuck or by I think we'd all agree that the trials were a success. Twenty survivors. I was satisfied in our planned endeavour. The responses to the Variables were satisfactory and encouraging. It is only a matter of time before we proved to be a variable time. We needed to shock these sex-ons, see their responses to sex in an area that the era deserves everything we were able to offer such a large population of kids that just never gave up.

On a whole, seeing them this way, taking all as well has been the hardest thing for me to observe. But there's no time for regret. For the good of our people, we will move forward.

I know I have my own feelings as to who should be chosen

as the leader but I refrain from saying anything so as not to influence any decisions. But the choice is an obvious choice.

We are all well aware of what's at stake. I for one am encouraged. Remember what the girl wrote on her arm before losing her memory. The one thing she chose to clasp on to. *WICKED is good*.

The subjects will eventually recall and understand the purpose of the happenings we have done and plan to do to them. The mission of WICKED is to serve and preserve humanity, no matter the cost. We are indeed "good".

Please respond with your own reactions. The subjects will be allowed only 10 minutes sleep before Stage 2 implementation. At this time let's allow ourselves a few hopes.

Group B's trial results were also most extraordinary. I need time to process the data, but we can touch on it in the morning.

Until tomorrow, then

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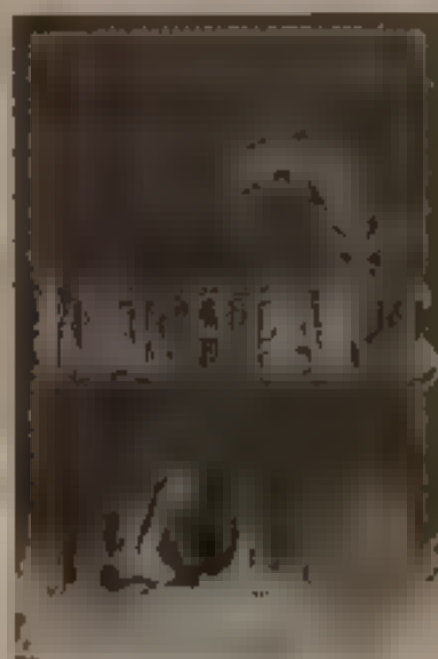
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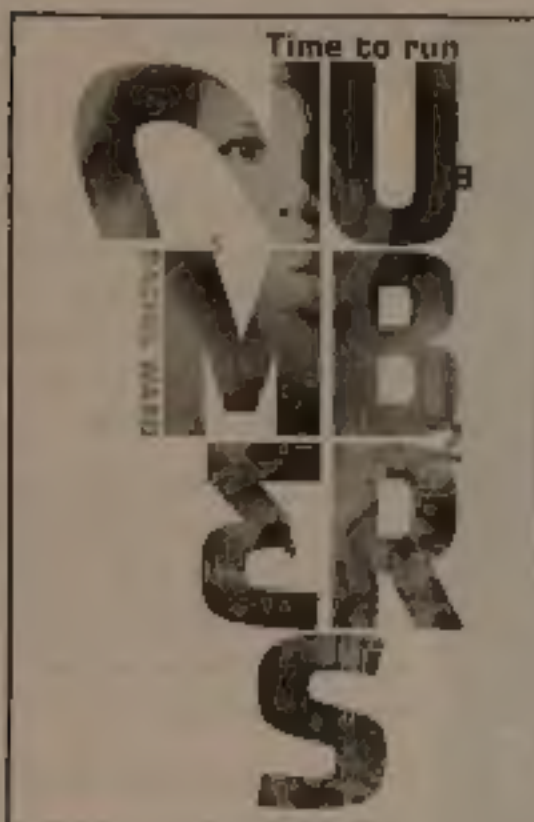
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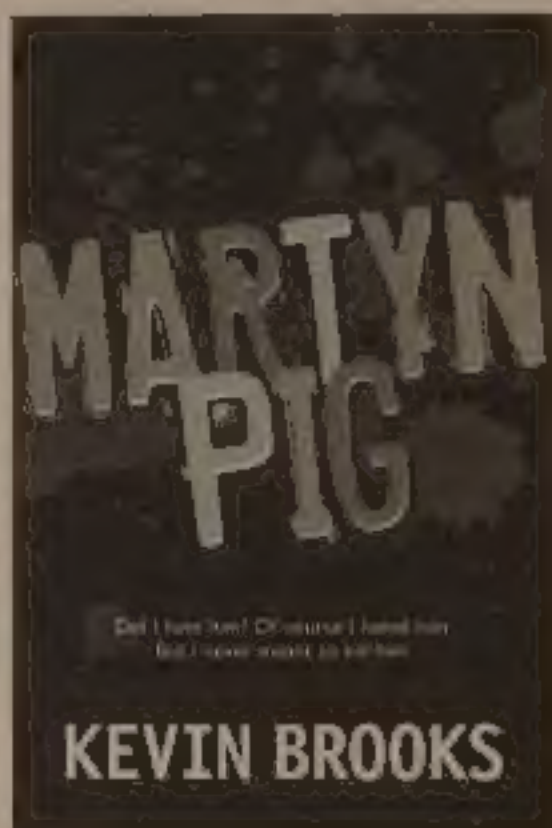
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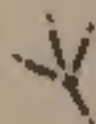
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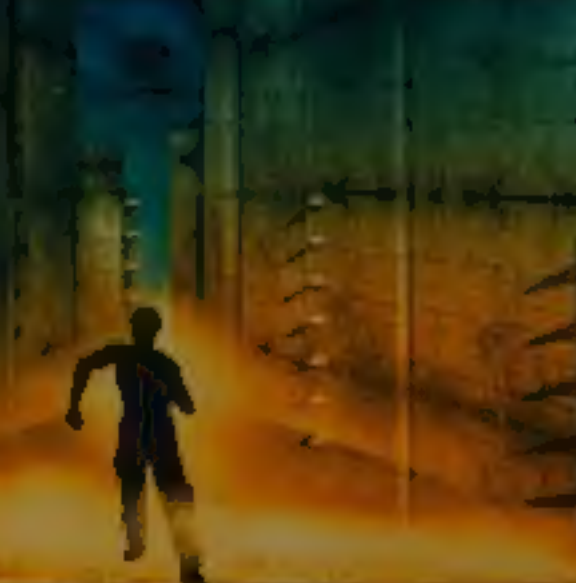
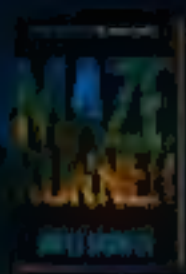
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